STORIES FROM ADULTS WHO GREW UP IN THE FOSTER CARE SYSTEM
AND WHAT THEY TELL US ABOUT ITS IMPACT ON THEIR SCHOOL COMPLETION IN AN URBAN SCHOOL SETTING

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ABSTRACT

Stories From Adults Who Grew Up In The Foster Care System
And What They Tell Us About Its Impact On Their School Completion In An Urban School Setting

By

Jennifer Madeline Rios-Zambrano

This narrative study examines the impact the foster care system had on the high school completion of adult former foster youth in an urban school setting. In particular, the study explores the experiences and reflections of former foster youth about the systems (school, child welfare agency, and legal) that raised them from their perspectives. The participants reflected and shared their personal experiences to provide detailed and accurate accounts of being a student while in the child welfare system. Through interviews and document analysis, a story surfaces that demonstrates collective narratives about the reality of the challenges, obstacles, and determination behind each participant’s journey to get through both the public school and the child welfare systems to become the adults they are.

Five major themes (Impact of Instability and Permanency within Placements and Schools, Lack of Trust and Reliability within Systems, Perceptions and Expectations, Collaboration and Accountability within Systems and Policies, and Self-Reflection on Survival as a Student in Foster Care, Attachment or Resilience) emerged from the participants’ stories that led to whether they were able to complete their secondary schooling. Attachment and resilience theories were used as a guide for participants’ self-
reflections about their survival in foster care and assisted in linking to existing literature associated with this subgroup of students.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to my family, friends, professors, and the foster youth I provide support to, all of whom have inspired me to be an advocate for youth in understanding the importance of education and the ability for anyone to accomplish their higher education with determination and support.

To my husband and travel partner Juan, thank you for loving me and challenging me to push myself to work towards completing the highest educational degree, which I thought I could never achieve. By pushing personal doubt aside and having strong support, I stand here today fulfilling an educational goal I thought I couldn’t have the pleasure of attaining. I share this accomplishment, not only with my daughter, Gabriella, and son, Joaquin, but also with all my nieces and nephews who have all shared in this educational journey. To my parents, who allowed me to be self-driven and explore the world for all it offers even from the early years of a preschooler. You raised me to be independent, not take a “no” without a fight or negotiation, and to work hard for my family. Thank you for understanding all the events, birthdays, or holidays that were cut short or skipped because of my schooling. Lastly, thank you to mom, who has helped us to raise my little Joaquin, from week one, so that I could continue to focus on completing this study after having him in my third year of this program.

To Sharon Ulanoff, my dissertation chair, thank you for all your positivity and many late night hours of support through this journey with me. You have shown me that, with the best support and encouragement, all is possible. This accomplishment wouldn’t be possible without you as my chair. Thank you for accepting the challenge. Thank you to my cohort 2 colleagues who never provided a dull moment, whether in class or group
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There are a variety of reasons that children and adolescents are placed in foster care, including abuse, neglect, incarceration of parents, and other criminal activities in the home (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013). In 2011 alone, 676,569 children in the United States were determined to be victims of abuse or neglect (Children’s Bureau, 2011). It is urgent to remove these youth from their families and homes to provide them protection when danger is imminent. Circumstances that take these youth from their families and homes are typically related to allegations that involve physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect.

Nationally, there were approximately 400,000 children under the age of 18 in out-of-home care on September 30, 2012, the last day of the federal fiscal year (Children’s Bureau, 2013; National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). While that number appears high, it has actually decreased by 29% since 1999 (Child Trends Databank, 2014). This downward trend in children being placed in foster care is also occurring in California. Between 2000 and 2010, the number of youth placed in out-of-home care decreased by 46% in California (McKlindon et al., 2011). Despite this decrease the state continues to have the highest number of foster youth, especially amongst Hispanics and African-Americans (Weinberg et al., 2003). Though these numbers are decreasing, there are still large numbers of youth in foster care, as shown in table one.

Despite removing children from their homes for protection, there are challenges once these children enter the foster care system, as their placements in out-of-home care
can also be problematic, with issues ranging from poor academic situations, instability in placements, and anxiety caused by separation from family or other negative circumstances, including abuse. Children in the foster care system are twice as likely to drop out of high school (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013). Merely knowing these statistics, however, is not enough. The marginalized status of foster youth in our society and our schools needs to be reexamined and given the attention it warrants.

Many foster children are at risk for not completing their secondary education due to socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and/or identified or unidentified special needs (Casey et al., 2003; McKlindon et al., 2011; Vacca, 2008). In addition, the majority of youth in foster care placement tend to be moved quite often, which has an impact not only on their academic performance and achievement in comparison to other students, but also on their ability to complete courses and the requirements for a high school diploma. Across the United States, youth in foster care continue to have the lowest four-year graduation rate when compared to other youth, as well as high rates of unemployment, incarceration, and homelessness (Frerer et al., 2013). The vulnerability and lack of advocacy that these particular at-risk youth face within school and community is amongst the highest when compared to their non-foster youth peers. This may be due to foster youths’ lack of permanency, stability, and a supportive family dynamic (Massinga & Pecora, 2004).

**Statement of the Problem**

In the United States, there are approximately 400,000 children and adolescents currently living in the foster care system in 2012 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013), and many of them were removed from their families because they were neglected
or abused. This specific population of youth needs high levels of quality education and support services to be successful during transitions between school and placement settings while dealing with the trauma associated with abuse. To that end, federal policies for the past decade have emphasized increasing permanency for foster youth (Office of Data, Analysis, Research and Evaluation, 2013). There is an extreme need for the child welfare and educational systems to address the poor outcomes of more than half of all foster youth placed in out of home care and to work to increase successful outcomes amongst this population. These two systems are supposed to provide positive role models and supports for the youth during the absence of extended family and friends and to match the positive circumstances other children might find in their home settings (National Center for Youth Law, 2010). However, too frequently, this does not occur, and foster youth are bounced from home to home and school setting to school setting. These circumstances can lead to school absences, loss of school credits, missing transcripts, inappropriate placements, and lack of special educational services (McKlin don et al., 2011). Foster youth are more likely to underperform academically when compared to their non-foster youth peers, misbehave in school, have higher suspension rates, and perform worse on state exams (Frerer et al., 2013). They are also less likely to complete high school on time.

The United States government has begun to recognize and address the shortcomings realized by students in foster care who drop out of high school before graduation and examine how dropping out has consequences that place a direct strain on the nation’s workforce and economy. The Obama administration has challenged districts, schools, parents/guardians, and students to address the current national dropout epidemic.
In February 2009, President Barack Obama addressed the need to take initiative in dealing with America’s epidemic of high school dropouts for our nation’s future, stating, “…Right now, three-quarters of the fastest-growing occupations require more than a high school diploma. And yet, just over half of our citizens have that level of education. We have one of the highest high school dropout rates of any industrialized nation” (Obama, 2009). The No Child Left Behind Act (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002) was put into place more than a decade ago and encouraged schools increase support and intervention services for foster youth, which, in turn, can increase graduation rates. Some examples of those educational services and supports in the school and home settings are the options for free after-school tutoring and the assignment of educational advocates.

Nowhere is this issue more noticeable than in California, which has the highest number of foster youth in the nation (Hernandez-Mekonnen et al., 2012; U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012a). In California, there were 58,699 children in foster care as of September 30, 2013, the last day of the federal fiscal year (Children’s Bureau, 2013; Needell, 2014). Approximately 80% of those children between the ages of five and seventeen were enrolled in California public schools, according to official census data (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). Barrat and Berliner (2013) further indicate that two thirds of the students in foster care are enrolled in ten percent of the state’s public school districts, with more than 19,000 foster youth residing and attending school in Los Angeles County (Table 1). In addition, foster youth are most likely to attend the state’s lowest-performing schools (Barrat & Berliner).

Barrat and Berliner (2013) discuss the fact that, historically, foster youth in California schools consistently underperform academically in comparison to not only
their non-foster youth peers, but also to other academically vulnerable subgroups of students, such as low-income students and English language learners. They argue that less than 45% of foster youth will complete high school or earn their General Education Diploma (GED) while in foster care (Barrat & Berliner). Even when foster youth are compared with a similar sample of disadvantaged youth, 53 percent of the disadvantaged youth completed high school, compared to less than 45% of foster youth (Frerer et al., 2013). The visible achievement gap for foster youth continues to be a major issue that the state of California tries to address.

Table 1

*Children in Foster Care in California and Los Angeles County in 2013*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>California</th>
<th>Los Angeles County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>13,557</td>
<td>African American/Black</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
<td>907</td>
<td>American Indian/Alaska Native</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1,450</td>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>28,484</td>
<td>Latino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>14,107</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Children in Foster Care</td>
<td>58,699</td>
<td>Total Children in Foster Care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


When we, as educators, make the educational success of children in foster care placement a priority, we will work toward curtailing the dropout rate for this group of students, which can decrease unemployment. Investing in this specific group of youth pay off in economic and societal terms in the form of increased graduation rates at the secondary and post-secondary levels, thus promoting career aspirations, better employment opportunities and growth in the nation’s workforce. Socially, the
investment could pay off in terms of cultivating culturally responsible former foster youth adults who may become engaged community members, leaders, business/homeowners, returning to their communities to give back to society for the common good. They may also model how foster youth can become independent functional adults within the community, rather than perpetuating the potential bleak adult lives that are typically portrayed for foster youth. According to studies, approximately 25% of former foster youth will be homeless at some point and/or arrested and incarcerated, 33% will receive public assistance, and 50% will be unemployed (Frerer et al., 2013). Currently, 70% of California adult prisons are populated with former foster youth (Frerer et al., 2013).

Further research on ways to identify factors that contribute to the improvement of opportunities for on-time high school graduation for foster youth will not only benefit the youth and the child welfare and educational systems, but can also improve society’s economic growth and decrease criminal activities within the community.

**Significance of the Problem**

Approximately 45% of foster youth become high school dropouts (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office 2010; Vacca, 2008). This group not only suffers academically, but also endures a host of issues related to emotional and physical abuse that caused them to be removed from their caregivers. Some of these issues are so severe that going to school takes a backseat to personal safety (Flynn et al., 2004; Tucker & Mackenzie, 2012). There is fundamentally unjust here and it is time for educators and social service providers to consider the long-term implications that these issues may be causing for adult former foster youth and society in general. Foster youth tend to be
overlooked when it comes to academic achievement and also in terms of educational opportunities for success (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office).

Academic problems among foster youth include high rates of absence and tardiness, higher rates of grade retention, disciplinary actions related to behavioral issues, and high rates of special education services usage (Casey Family Foundation, 2004). As a result of such issues, these students are also more likely to perform below grade level in reading and attain lower scores on statewide achievement tests (Stuart Foundation, 2011). Due to students in foster care having limited guidance from family members, which their non-foster youth peers might receive from their parents, foster youth are less likely to take courses that adequately prepare them for college, which puts them at further risk of dropping out of high school. Many foster children have little or no access to advanced placement courses, extracurricular sports and activities, or other educational support programs included in a well-balanced education (Casey et al., 2003). Such educational, social, and extracurricular programs can serve as harbingers for a brighter future since they are great platforms for social interaction and emotional support for all students.

Why is it difficult for foster youth to tap into these same resources? The reasons stem from a variety of sources, including structural flaws in the foster care and educational systems that hinder collaboration and lead to fragmented relationships between key agencies.

One of the main problems is that there is not one person solely responsible for the educational outcomes of children in foster care, but, rather, multiple people from various systems of care (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008). The myriad people involved in the education of foster children, from foster parents, birth parents,
case workers, teachers, counselors, various agencies, and the like, often have strained and fragmented relationships, resulting in a lack of coordination (Stuart Foundation, 2011). It is imperative for the key parties involved in the youths’ education to come together to be retrained on policies and procedures, ensuring consistency in planning for the foster youth while in foster care placement and entering a new school setting. Good judgment and better interagency communication can have a positive impact on foster youth’s placement in an appropriate educational setting.

Because foster youth enrollment at any one school is often limited in time due to frequent changes in foster placements, they often cannot be fully evaluated to address academic needs, making it more difficult for them to receive adequate supports and services (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). Not having a stable home environment is difficult, but this vulnerable group also contends with constant adjustments to new teachers, new curricula, and new social settings. It is no wonder that some, if not most, foster youth develop emotional and behavioral problems that interfere with learning. Students in foster care placements tend to be stigmatized as low-achieving due to this bouncing from different school site to school site as a result of unstable foster care placements (Vacca, 2008).

As educators, it is imperative that we assist foster youth by encouraging them to become familiar with their rights and advocates for themselves. Educators can learn how to support foster youth through professional development or trainings through their school sites and/or districts specifically addressed to meeting the needs of students in foster care. Such professional development and trainings should review the statistics related to low academic achievement for foster youth as well as the background of the
foster care system and the students it serves. Lastly, the laws and educational policies that protect and support students in foster care should be thoroughly explained, so that educators come to understand the guidelines and best practices that have been developed to meet the needs of these students. These types of professional development and trainings should also make educators aware of the other systems that serve these students and the supports that can be aligned to meet their needs.

Educators can help foster youth to overcome the issues they face by assisting them with the development of adequate and appropriate social skills, which may be more difficult for some foster youth who have a history of abusive circumstances (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). Assisting foster youth can include referral to a mental health counselor at the school placement, encouragement to join a social club or group, a peer-mentor group, or engagement in school leadership. By encouraging the development of healthy and appropriate social skills at the school site, these skills can be used in the community and in relationships with others. It is also important to model what is appropriate and what is not within the different settings of school, among friends, and within employment (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Educators must take into account the student’s comfort level when working with him/her to develop adequate and appropriate social skills. Since they may lack social skills, educators must support them in a safe space.

Promoting academic success and supportive environment is not difficult or impossible, as all that is needed is support from school personnel and social service support agents. This is not merely an access issue or an issue with the breakdown of communication between two loosely structured systems, but includes issues that foster youth face with inequities that go beyond the school. Fundamental holes in the foster
care system and the often loosely-structured communication between schools and advocacy agencies may result in unintended negative consequences despite well-intentioned policies (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

**The Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the personal stories of former foster youth as they reflected on their experiences while in the foster care system. The goal was to explore whether these circumstances had an impact on their school completion and graduation, specifically looking at the role of the child welfare and educational systems that served them during this period of time. A further emphasis on issues that affected on-time four-year high school completion and graduation also guided the study.

The study used qualitative research methods, specifically narrative inquiry, to examine the individual stories that were told in their natural setting (Creswell, 1998). The overarching research question for the narrative study is “What do the stories of adults who grew up in the foster care system tell us about its impact on school completion in an urban setting?”

In order to answer this main research question, the researcher conducted a narrative inquiry with six adults, all of whom are former foster youth in Los Angeles County and who attended a public urban school while in foster care placement. Out of the six participants, only three completed their secondary education and graduated from high school, while the other three did not. However, two of the participants did subsequently received alternative diplomas. The study examined all participants’ perceptions regarding the impact of the child welfare and educational systems on their
ability to complete school. The following research question and sub-questions guided the research process and influenced the course of the study:

1. What do the stories of adults who grew up in the foster care system tell us about its impact on school completion in an urban setting?
   a. What are the participants' perceptions about the structures of the child welfare agency that helped or hindered them from completing school?
   b. What are the participants' perceptions about structures of the public educational system that helped or hindered them in completing school?
   c. How do participants perceive the collaboration between the two systems helped or hindered them in completing school?
   d. Who helped or hindered the participants in completing school?
   e. What did the participants do to help themselves complete school?

This study uncovered data to inform educators, social workers, foster families, biological families, and other direct support agents about the decisions that are made for foster youth in relation to their academic achievement and personal development. These educators and agents within the public school, child welfare agency, and other support systems make decisions that greatly affect children, such as decisions regarding the number of placements and school changes within any given year. Lastly the study used attachment and resilience theories in exploring the relationship between completion of high school and the variables related to the participant’s personal experiences as a student in foster care that impacted or hindered their persistence to complete school.
Brief Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

An examination of attachment and resilience theories and their relationship to the success and failure of foster youth contextualized this study. Attachment theory takes the perspective that children need a secure connection with a parent or primary caregiver in order to develop lifelong social and emotional skills to assist with adverse situations in their environments (Frerer et al. 2013). Studies have shown a connection between children who were abused and/or did not have their emotional needs met by their parents and an inability to form positive relationships in the future, including with their own children, thus increasing the likelihood of continuing the abusive cycle (Bretherton, 1992; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995; Frerer et al, 2013; Lips, 2007). As a result, abused children entering the foster care system may have issues with developing positive relationships and experiences with others due to prior abuse. This lack of ability to make healthy connections with others can affect their adjustment to the new caregiver while in foster care placement, which can increase the likelihood of poor outcomes related to foster home instability due to behavioral problems, social emotional issues, and inability to develop attachment to caregiver (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). These types of negative outcomes can impact whether a foster youth moves from foster home to foster home and from school to school, increasing the likelihood of dropping out of school without graduating (Malekpour, 2005; Tucker & Mackenzie, 2012).

The importance of foster youth developing positive attachments to caregivers and support agents may influence the likelihood of successfully stopping the abuse cycle, performing well in school, and attaining positive relationships with others. Collaboration between the caregivers and the child welfare agency and educational systems are
necessary for applying appropriate interventions to deal with attachment issues that the youth may be facing or has faced in a previous environment so that they can work toward a better chance at successful life outcomes for the youth (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005).

Another perspective this study considered is resilience theory, which can be described as a process whereby people are able to bounce back from adversity and go on with their lives with positive outcomes (Connor & Davidson, 2003; Lietz & Strength, 2011). To understand resilience theory, specifically for youth who have not only been abused but have also been removed from the family caretaker, necessitates understanding the effects of child abuse and home instability that a child needs to survive while in foster care. A foster youth who demonstrates resilience in their progression through the negative circumstances that preceded placement in foster care and the adjustment to the placement will be able to achieve their individual goals and/or permanency in their life and move past the trauma and abuse she or he experienced.

The next chapter explores more deeply the systems that surround foster youth and reviews the literature related to these children and their families. Caregivers as well as the legal, educational, and child welfare systems that assist with stabilization after the children are removed from the home. The collaboration of these systems can negatively or positively influence the sociocultural factors associated with foster youth and their ability to complete their education. On a larger scale, statistics show that poor outcomes for foster youth will affect communities and government as a whole through higher rates of public assistance, unemployment, criminal activity, and homelessness (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007). Stakeholders who focus on school success for foster youth should consider that
addressing education “may not heal all the damage already inflicted early in the lives of foster children, but it can give these children…the fighting chance they need and deserve to thrive as adults” (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008).

**Operational Definitions**

Table 2 defines the terms as they will be used throughout the study.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aging-out</td>
<td>The process by which a foster youth becomes a legal age and is no longer considered a responsibility of the state sponsored child welfare system (Harris-Sims, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attachment Theory</td>
<td>The development of a relationship with at least one primary caregiver for appropriate emotional and social development to form during infancy and childhood. Attachment theory explains the importance of a parent/s relationship with the child will influence their development (Mennen, &amp; O'Keefe (2005).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)</td>
<td>The county agency responsible for ensuring child welfare and the implementation of Title V of the Social Security Act of 1935, section IV-A, Aid to Families with Dependent Children regulations on child welfare and safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emancipation</td>
<td>The process by which a foster youth is released from dependency status of the state funded child welfare system due to court proceeding. Depending on the state, this action occurs between the ages of 18 and 21 (Harris-Simms, 2006).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Care</td>
<td>The care given to children within the state’s foster care system who are temporarily separated from their families due to abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, and/or death in a family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Family Home</td>
<td>Any residential facility providing 24-hour care for six or fewer foster children, which is owned, leased, or rented and is the residence of the foster parent or parents, including their family, in whose care the foster children have been placed. A foster family home may be authorized to provide care for more than six children for the purpose of keeping siblings together provided that the conditions of California Health and Safety Code Section 1505.2 are met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster Youth</td>
<td>A child between the ages of 0 and 21 currently a dependent of the state child welfare system and currently living in a state funded residence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School Graduation Status</td>
<td>This status indicates whether a student graduated from high school by high school diploma.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IEP Status</td>
<td>This status indicates whether a student received special education services through an Individual Education Plan (IEP).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initial Removal Age</td>
<td>The age of children when they are initially removed from the home of the parents. This initial removal age is for the first placement at the time the data were extracted.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non Graduation</th>
<th>Foster youth whose case was closed due to aging out of the system with the case closing between the ages of 20 and 21 and the last recorded grade level of 10th grade.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Placements</td>
<td>Amount of times student is moved from one residential placement to another placement within the course of time in foster care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-Home Care or Placement</td>
<td>Condition in which a child is removed from the family home and placed in an alternate living environment as a ward or dependent of the court.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive Outcomes</td>
<td>“…successful life adaptation in specific developmental tasks, which are supportive of later positive adaptation in specific new developmental tasks culminating in a higher likelihood of reaching a global designation in adulthood as a ‘resilient child or adult’” (Kumpfer, 1999, p. 184).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Cases</td>
<td>The number of cases the child had prior to the current case. In other words, the number of times a child is removed from the home of the parent and is placed in foster care.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Placement Count</td>
<td>The number of placements that occurred within the cases prior to the current case.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resilience Theory</td>
<td>Resilience is “the process of coping with disruptive, stressful, or challenging life events in a way that provides the individual with additional protective and coping skills than prior to the disruption that results from the event” (Richardson et al., 1990, p. 34).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Origin</td>
<td>The school the foster youth attended when they were permanently housed; the school in which the youth was last enrolled while in foster care; or the school the youth has attended in the last 15 months and is most closely connected to.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time in Placement</td>
<td>The amount of time (in years) that a foster care case is open.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion**

This chapter introduced background information regarding foster youth in the United States and California, especially within Los Angeles County, and the statistics related to low graduation rates and poor life outcomes of this population. Also presented in this chapter was the critical need for institutions, such as child welfare agency and educational systems, to identify and aggressively address the sociocultural factors that shape and have an impact on a foster youth’s academic experiences and outcomes. As discussed in this chapter, 50% of foster youth face grim futures if change is not implemented within the foster care system, resulting in negative outcomes that also affect local schools, communities, and the economy overall (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Center for

Chapter two describes the theoretical framework that contextualized the study and reviews the literature in relation to youth within the foster care and public education systems as well as the sociocultural factors related to foster youths’ educational experiences in Los Angeles County. This review is intended to highlight the gaps in the literature related to foster youth and high school completion and graduation. Although there is a great amount of research related to the educational outcomes for foster youth in urban public school settings, a small fraction of the research examined actual foster youths’ personal experiences and perspectives on both systems that provide them with the educational opportunities they need to succeed in life after they graduate from high school and turn and/or age out of the system (Casey et al., 2003; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; McKlindon et al., 2011; Vacca, 2008).
CHAPTER 2

Review of the Literature

Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I hate the past. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean my life won’t last. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I have no control. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean it’s not my life I wish to hold. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I care what you think. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I smoke or drink. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I am a fool. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I’ll quit on school. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean I am afraid of pain. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean my past wasn’t a gain. Just because I am a foster child, doesn’t mean this isn’t the beginning. But because I am a foster child, in my heart, I am winning.

Poem written by a Youth in an LSS Foster home

(Submitted by Dede Mogck, Director of Foster Care and Adoption Programs)

Children and youth in foster care have aspirations much the same as those of their non-foster youth peers of similar ages who live at home with their natural parents. However, foster youth can face more barriers than a typical child or teenager would, often due to the factors that led to their being removed from their family. Once placed in the foster care system, the child may experience educational neglect due to frequent changes in school settings in addition to the loss of their parents/guardians as advocates (Casey et al., 2003). Research consistently shows that foster youth have the highest rate of academic failure in comparison to other low performing subgroups, such as low
income and English Language Learners; along with poor academic achievement, foster youth also have the highest non-graduation rate and, the lowest postsecondary attendance (Frerer et al. 2013; Jones, 2010; Massinga & Pecora). Several factors contribute to the low high school completion rates amongst foster youth, including “…experiences prior to (i.e., neglect and abuse, poverty, learning disabilities, and behavioral and emotional problems) and during foster care placement (i.e. placement disruption and school change)” (Day et al., 2012, p. 1008). Since education is a key stepping stone for a better quality of life as an adult, including economic, social, and personal benefits, it is important for educators to explore the reasons that foster youth continue to slip through the educational cracks at rates higher than other disadvantaged subgroups.

Research on foster youth completing their education is related to the systems (family, legal, child welfare agency, and educational) that serve their needs during this critical stage, which involves maximizing educational attainment for better life outcomes (Frerer et al., 2013). This study explored the effects of the care that youth receive while in the foster care system and its relationship to educational attainment in secondary school. In examining the literature related to this topic, the review is divided into three sections. The first section reviews the literature related to attachment theory and resilience theory in relation to foster youth. The second section reviews the literature related to the purpose of the development of various systems, laws, and policies to protect youth and not hinder their educational experiences while in their care. The third section reviews current literature and research related to high school completion of youth within foster care system, as both foster and educational systems raise them during this imperative stage of life development.
Attachment and Resilience Theories Related to Foster Youth

This section examines the literature related to attachment and resilience theories as they relate to foster youth. Attachment theory is often discussed as a means to describe relationships between parents and children (Barth et al., 2005). Resilience theory is further situated in the research on youth development that documents how caring relationships help with overcoming adversity (Bernard & Slade, 2009).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory suggests that children come into the world innately craving to form attachments with others in order to survive (Bowlby, 1973a; 1973b; 1973c). The affectionate bond of a child to his or her parent or guardian, which gives the child a sense of security, is called attachment and is typically developed within the first year of life (Bowlby, 1973a; Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005; Page et al., 2006). Bowlby’s work on attachment theory holds significance within child development research and is also considered important within the research on foster care dynamics (Tucker & Mackenzie, 2012). In the social services and social science fields, attachment theory assists service professionals’ understanding of the importance for children and youth in foster care to develop relationships with their caregiver/s. Such attachments have been shown to increase the chances of more positive outcomes for foster youth (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005).

Attachments between children and their caregivers are often linked directly to an individual foster youth’s actions as well as to how caregivers and various agencies (child welfare, educational and legal systems) make decisions with regards to the child’s best interests (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). Lack of developing attachments can lead to
potentially harmful outcomes for the foster child and his/her ability to build long lasting relationships and have stability in his/her life (Malekpour, 2005).

There can be various factors that make it difficult for foster youth to develop attachments to their caregivers, such as frequent changes in placements, lack of relationships between foster youth and their foster parents, or other problems that stem from the reasons that they were removed from their homes in the first place. Research suggests that lack of such attachments may be responsible for behavioral and developmental issues (Malekpour, 2005). In the case of foster youth, the responsibility to address those issues tends to fall into the hands of the child welfare system. Given the often overwhelmingly high caseloads for social workers or inability to find a compatible or available foster placement, this may result in unstable placements for children, which can serve to exacerbate the problem (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005).

Currently, child welfare policies attempt to address the importance of developing attachments for children in the child welfare system by attempting to create stability in placements, which helps children and caregivers build relationships (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). Pecora et al. (2009) argue that it is extremely important to match the foster child’s needs with the strengths of the families with whom they are placed. However, placements are not always successful. Some studies have shown that, when foster youth lack stable placements and long lasting relationships, they are less likely to form positive permanent relationships with their caregivers (Tucker & MacKenzie, 2012), thus causing placement instability. When placements are changed often, there are also frequent changes of schools, which lead to a higher risk of not completing school (Tucker & Mackenzie).
Attachment theorists believe that the first requirement for attachment development is related to whether or not a caregiver is emotionally available to the child for his/her development of self, as well as for the relation of self to others (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005; Bowlby, 1973a; 1973b; 1973c). Bowlby (1973a) firmly states that a close mother-infant relationship is essential for socio-emotional adjustment, which occurs when an infant or young child experiences an affectionate, intimate, and continuous relationship with his or her mother or a particular person who steadily “mothers” him/her. As with this type of connection or bond in a relationship, both persons find fulfillment and pleasure. Most children who have been abused or neglected and enter the foster care system, have experienced a lack of protection from their parents/guardians, and some face loss from not being with those same people, which can make it difficult to develop attachment and trust with new caregivers while in foster care (National Center for Youth Law, 2006). These children may find it difficult to form new attachments as a result of the maltreatment that caused them to be removed from the home in the first place or as a result of continued neglect and/or abuse while in foster care (May, 2005).

While in foster care, abandonment issues can result from the temporary nature of some placements, which makes relationships and attachment that much harder to develop and maintain (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005; Tucker & Mackenzie, 2012). In addition, children placed in foster care typically experienced abuse or neglect that caused the separation from their parents/guardians and which directly affects their personal understanding of self and others (Bowlby, 1973c). If a child receives love and has his or her needs met by a caregiver over time, the child is more likely to develop a positive sense of self as loveable and worthy of care (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991).
Conversely, if a child does not receive consistent love and nurturing by his/her caregiver then she or he is more likely to perceive him/herself as unlovable and unworthy (Ackerman & Dozier, 2005).

Care must be taken to avoid frequent changes in placements to provide the stability that is needed for foster youth to develop as secure adults (Tucker & Mackenzie, 2012). Therefore, when the child welfare agency social workers assess the youth’s placement, they must also consider the impact it could have on his/her personal growth and the connection to his/her academic setting because relationships and connections are important there, too (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005).

**Resilience Theory**

“Resilience embodies the personal qualities that enable one to thrive in the face of adversity” (Connor & Davidson, 2003, p. 76). Resilience theory examines internal and external stressors and an individual’s ability to deal successfully with positive and negative disruptions (Connor & Davidson). Foster youth may face traumatic and abusive circumstances prior to placement, and, while the design of the child welfare agency is to provide a caring and stable placement while in care, there can also be traumatic settings that do not support the development of resilience and stress-coping ability (National Center for Youth Law, 2006). Social service professionals found resilience to be a key factor in the positive educational, social, and emotional outcomes experienced by youth during the adjustment process to a new placement and when transitioning to out-of-home care (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007).

Richardson (2002) argues that some individuals may have an innate capacity for resilience. Further research suggests that individuals who are resilient can overcome and
become strengthened through adversity and the obstacles they face and demonstrate an ability to bounce back from a negative incident stronger than they were before it happened (Lietz & Strength, 2011). For foster youth, developing resilience needs to be more than withstanding the circumstances that brought them to placement. It must also include a drive for embedded survival, positive growth, and resourcefulness under highly stressful circumstances and life experiences (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). When exploring resilience theory, there are two aspects that are important to address in order to say that a youth has displayed resilience: exposure to “substantial risk or adversity and the attainment of positive adaption” (Flynn et al., 2004, p. 65). Moreover, resilience has been identified as a developmental process versus a personal trait; therefore, foster youth who have had traumatic and abusive experiences may, over time, develop the ability to emerge from experiences for the better while other foster youth may not (Yates et al., 2003).

Studies about protective factors, or conditions that protect against the impact of specific barriers to success (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2008) have assisted developmental researchers to comprehend resilient children’s ability to form relationships with caregivers despite past maltreatment (Lynch, 2011). Those protective factors, such as social competence, problem-solving skills, or a sense of purpose (Santos, n.d.) can become critical factors that uniquely support foster youth when they experience risk factors in the home. While there are various personal protective factors that can help children develop resilience, such as low-risk environments, the development of positive relationships has consistently been found to be dominant in studies that show better outcomes for these children (Flynn et al., 2004). In order for foster youth to move past
the adversity resulting from the causes of their removal from the family home, school, and community settings, the instability of the foster placement or multiple placements, and development, or lack thereof, of positive relationships, they must make positive adjustments to life’s circumstances to achieve better outcomes (Jones, 2012). In addition, Atwool (2006) suggests that strong attachments can serve as the basis for developing resilience. Resilience theory, therefore, is one area to be examined when working with foster youth to support positive outcomes.

**Development of Various Systems, Laws, and Policies to Protect Foster Youth**

The development of the foster care system in the U.S. began as a charity organization in the early 1700’s and, by 1974, the child welfare system became a federal funded mandate serving almost a half million abused and neglected children (Murray & Gesiriech, 2004; Weinberg, 2007). Currently, there are an estimated 800,000 children in foster care in the United States on one day; in 2013, California served more than 58,000 of them throughout the state (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2012; Needell, 2014; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012), the largest number of foster youth in the U.S. This section provides an overview of the development of the United States’ foster care system and federal and state laws and policies that serve this vulnerable population within both the child welfare and the educational systems. It further describes specific California policies and laws that are aligned with the U.S. foster care system.

**History of the Foster Care System**

Throughout the history of the United States, the role of the government in the child welfare system has been to provide alternatives for families when it is not safe or
possible for children to stay in their homes, including providing a safety net for abused or neglected children (Foster, 2001). This notion of protecting youth from their parents and/or guardians due to abuse or neglect has evolved greatly, from authorities avoiding involvement in family matters to intervening by safely removing a child from an abusive home (McGowan, 2005). This section discusses the historical events, agencies, and practices that took place before 1974 when the US federal government passed the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). CAPTA was the precursor to the establishment of the Office of Child Protective Services (CPS).

In the 1700s, children who were left on their own because their parents were unable to care for them were considered to be “orphans” (Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). These orphans were typically indentured to work for other families as a means of survival. There was no organization or government agency charged with overseeing the treatment these youth received while they were in the care of the “new” families. In the early 1800s, the first orphanages in the U.S. were established by private religious and charitable organizations to assist with the increased number of youth on the streets. Fifty years later, placing children in orphanages was considered controversial due to the long-term effects that living in an orphanage might have on their future success (Murray & Gesiriech, 2004). One argument against orphanages was the concern that they did not provide orphans with good work ethics and morals, with the idea that these traits could only be acquired from being raised by one’s family.

Charles Loring Brace, a minister serving abandoned children, women, and poor families in the slums of New York, was a social reformist who pushed for change in the care of orphans and homeless youth in the second half of the 19th century (McGowan,
Loring Brace believed that, if orphans were provided the appropriate religious background and the foundation of a good work ethic, they would become successful adults. He became a child advocate and helped to develop the Children’s Aid Society in New York in 1853 (McGowan, 2005), an early type of foster care system, which placed children in Christian homes, instead of orphanages. Loring Brace expanded the Children’s Aid Societies to other major eastern cities by the end of the 19th century, and began a program moving orphans from New York to live with Christian families in the Midwest and the upstate New York area who would foster them for free. Loring Brace’s Emigration Plan, also known as the Orphan Trains Program, transported children to various towns to stay with families willing to foster them in their homes (McGowan, 2005). Potential foster families would await the arrival of the trains and interview the children at local train stations, town halls, and/or schools. By 1879, the Children’s Aid Society had placed than 40,000 orphans or homeless children from New York in foster homes (McGowan, 2005).

Prior to the early 1900s, there were few precedents in the United States to provide children with any type of legal protection from abuse or neglect. In fact, no criminal prosecutions occurred for even the most heinous crimes committed against youth by their parents until 1869. Fletcher v. People (1869) was one of the first cases to prosecute an Illinois father due to his treatment of his blind son, whom he confined to a cold cellar in the middle of winter (McGowan, 2005; Mochel, 2012). Although the defense counsel argued the father had the right to raise and punish his child as he saw fit, the Illinois Supreme Court disagreed, stating “authority must be exercised within the bounds of reason and humanity. If the parent commits wanton and needless cruelty upon his child,
by imprisonment of this character or by inhuman beating, the law will punish him” 

(Fletcher v. People, 52 Il. 395, 1869).

In 1856, the Supreme Court heard a rape case, one of California’s first ever rape cases, which involved a thirteen year old victim (People v. Benson, 1856). The aftermath of this particular case caused public uproar and a search for legal justice for such abuse, especially since the majority of the rape appeals in California at the time involved children as the victims (McGowan, 2005; Mochel, 2012). Awareness about the maltreatment of children spread rapidly after these cases and others were brought to the public’s attention. While children’s welfare agencies continued to emerge as a result of these incidents, at the time, there were no government agencies protecting children in the U.S. However, there was an increase in the number of agencies that became involved in aiding abused children.

The development of an organized child welfare agency emerged in 1874 after Etta Wheeler, a religious missionary, rescued Mary Ellen Wilson, a nine-year-old girl who was being physically abused and neglected by her guardians in the New York suburb of Hell’s Kitchen (Meyers, 2008). Wheeler made several attempts to keep the child from being beaten regularly by trying to get assistance from local police and children’s charities, but, with no authority or the legal ability to intervene, the girl remained in the abusive care of her guardians. Wheeler eventually received assistance from Henry Bergh, founder of American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who was able to help remove the girl from her guardian’s abusive home with the assistance of his lawyer, Elbridge Gerry (Meyers, 2008). After the successful rescue of Mary Ellen Wilson, Bergh and Gerry created the first non-governmental charitable society
specifically designated for child protection, the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NYSPCC). By 1922, the NYSPCC had spread throughout the U.S. and more than 300 non-governmental child protection societies were assisting children in their local areas.

Child abuse is not a new phenomenon. The abuse and neglect of children has been documented for more than 2,000 years. However, attempts to prevent child abuse are relatively new, mostly beginning in the 20th century. Title V of the Social Security Act of 1935 and section IV-A Aid to Families with Dependent Children both have regulations on child welfare and safety and also have designated agencies to adequately provide support services for youth in foster care or who are wards of the court. Within California, these child welfare agencies are known as the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and are divided by county lines to cover specific areas. Los Angeles County DCFS covers almost a hundred cities across the county in one of the most culturally diverse areas of California where over half of residents speak more than one language in their homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Los Angeles County DCFS served almost 20,000 foster youth in out-of-home placements in 2013 (Needell, 2014).

Laws specific to child abuse did not come about until 1961 when the American Academy of Pediatrics held a conference on the battered child syndrome, which resulted in many states’ passing laws to protect children from physical abuse (McGowan, 2005). At this point, the development of the child welfare agency progressed from merely recognizing that cruelty to children was immoral, to identifying it as a criminal act upon youth. The twentieth century saw the development of nationwide, government-led child services, which provide protection and immediate out-of-home care for minors. In 1974,
the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), Public Law 93-247, was signed into law. CAPTA mandated states to implement and define child abuse and reporting laws as well as define when other family members or the juvenile courts have to intervene to take custody of a minor due to neglect or abuse from parents or guardians (Weinberg, 2007). Table 3 provides a summary of major federal events in development of child welfare protections in the 21st century (McGowan, 2005).

Table 3

Major Federal Events in Children, Youth, and Family Services 1912-1999

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Creation of U.S. Children’s Bureau</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>Title V, Child Welfare Services Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>Social Security Amendment (AFDC), Child Welfare Services Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>CAPTA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Family Preservation and Support Services Program, P.L. 103-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Foster Care and Independence Act, P.L. 106-169</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Educational Rights and Stability in Federal and State Legislation

Children and youth in foster care often face adversity caused by abuse and/or neglect prior to placement and have to deal with the transition to a new home while adapting to out-of-home placement and, typically, a new educational setting. According to national statistics, almost half of those who enter the educational system as foster youth fail to complete their secondary education (Frerer et al., 2013). These children are over-represented in special education and often experience a lack of collaboration between systems of care to address their education and school placement needs. Zetlin et al. (2006) discuss the barriers that foster youth face in attempting to maneuver through the educational system. These barriers include lack of appropriate educational supports
and services, instability of placements, and the lack of collaboration between child welfare agency and educational system (Zetlin et al.). In addition, there is a lack of progress monitoring while children and youth are in the care of both systems, such that the educational rights of foster youth are not considered in the same ways that a parent or guardian might consider them for non-foster youth. Foster youth have higher high school dropout rates than do non-foster youth. These factors highlight the need for the work of the legislative and educational systems to support educational attainment and positive adult outcomes for foster youth (Zetlin et al., 2006).

While discussing the fact that foster youth are over-represented in special educational services as compared to non-foster youth, it must be taken into account that neglected and abused children have been shown to have a wide range of factors that contribute to the “possibility of disabilities or simply indicate the difficult lives they have had, such as lower academic performance, poorer grades, higher grade retention, more disciplinary problems, and greater absenteeism” (Weinberg, 2007, p. 19). Just as the child welfare agencies cared for many children with special needs in the mid-1900s due to their parents’ or guardians’ having difficulty caring for their needs and/or behaviors, the foster care system seems to have many youth identified as having special needs today. As a result of some of the highlighted issues, there are state and federal laws that address children’s rights, regardless of home situation. In 1987, under President Ronald Reagan, the McKinney–Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (P. L. 100-77, July 22, 1987, 101 Stat. 482, 42 U.S.C. § 11301 et seq.) became federal law in the United States. This law was passed to address and assist states by providing federal money to support the economic hardship that the states faced because they were unable to meet the needs of the
growing homeless population. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act provided shelter programs for homeless adults and youth, and included support for children waiting for foster care placement. Since 1987, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act has continued to be endorsed and funded. Most recently, it was reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB, 2002).

NCLB (2002) requires school districts to ensure that homeless children awaiting foster care placement have access to education and the other services they need so they can meet the same academic achievement standards as their non-foster youth peers. In addition, State Educational Agencies (SEAs) are required to designate a homeless liaison to make sure that the requirements of NCLB are being implemented and made available for this group, including attention to enrollment, attendance, and school completion issues. SEAs are also required to make certain youth identified as homeless have equal access to the same free and appropriate public education as their peers. Furthermore, homeless and foster care students may not be separated from the mainstream school environment. NCLB further requires states and local districts to review and develop laws, policies, and best practices to prevent a delay in foster and homeless youth’s enrollment, attendance, or success in school.

On January 1, 2004, California took additional steps to ensure that educational attainment was addressed and improved for foster youth by implementing Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490). AB 490, which was based on the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, established new rights for the education of youth in the foster care system and other dependents of the court (Steinberg, 2004). The goal of AB 490 was to ensure that educational rights and stability of foster youth and other dependents of the court were
made priorities by all systems involved in their care. AB 490 was created to hold child welfare agencies and educational systems accountable for improving educational outcomes for these two populations. The AB 490 legislation states the following:

Establishes legislative intent that foster youth are ensured access to the same opportunities to meet academic achievement standards to which all students are held, maintain stable school placements, be placed in the least restrictive educational placement and, have access to the same academic resources, services and extracurricular and enrichment activities as all other children. Makes clear that education and school placement decisions are to be dictated by the best interest of the child (Assembly Bill 490, 2003).

Another issue for foster youth is aging out, which means that they must exit care when they turn 18. In an effort to address the nation’s overwhelming negative results of aging out, Congress passed The Fostering Connections Act in 2008, to provide support for these young adults and extend services and resources for those who turn 18. The Fostering Connections Act is a federal program that funds all states to extend foster care services until participants reach the age of 21. Since then, nationwide 80 bills/laws related to this legislation have been developed; these bills/laws allow youth to stay within the system to maintain the necessary stability to transition from exiting the school system and also giving them more time to learn independent life skills.

One of the most significant barriers for foster youth is the instability of their placements, which also leads to high transfer rates among various school settings following changes in placements (Shea et al., 2008). Research has shown that frequent
school transfers can lead to inappropriate placements, delays in enrollment, and loss of credits (Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Lips, 2007). School transfers may also result in educational disruptions that reduce the ability to connect with teachers, mentors, and peers, and force them to forego participation in extracurricular activities. Studies have also shown that youth who change schools even one time are less than 50 percent as likely to graduate from high school as their peers who do not change schools at all (Rumberger et al., 1999). As a result, many foster youth suffer academically and are unable to be part of a community that supports them and nurtures their academic and personal growth.

While AB 490 addressed these problems by promoting school stability, timely school transfers, and greater cross-district acceptance of partial school credits, two additional laws were passed by the California legislature in 2010 to address issues caused by being bounced from placement to placement and school to school. The two new bills, AB 1933 and Senate Bill (SB) 1353, went further to assist in improving educational stability and overall outcomes for the youth in the care of the child welfare agency by increasing the chances that they eventually graduate with their peers and by requiring greater consideration of their educational stability when making placement decisions.

On September 10, 2010, Assembly Bill 1933: Permitting Students to Remain in Their School of Origin was signed into law to amend AB 490. AB 1933 allows foster youth to remain in their schools of origin and/or school systems for as long as they are in foster care, or until the end of the school year if changes are made mid-year. The youth retains this right even after changing grade levels or moving out of the school area or district. The bill tackles on-time high school graduation rates for these youth by allowing
them to remain in their schools of origin prior to placement or placement change for as long as they are in foster care, if it is in their best interests. By allowing children to continue to attend the school of origin, she or he can stay at the same school site and move on to the next school level in the same location, if desired. This bill also protects foster youth who have closed cases with the child welfare agency by requiring schools to allow youth to complete their academic programs and to continue attending the school of origin through the “duration of the academic school year” (Cal. Ed. Code § 48853.5(d)(2)). AB 1933 addresses the negative pattern of foster youth being bounced around between numerous placements, which can affect school stability (Rumberger et al., 1999). Multiple school settings can result in education-related problems, such as loss of school credits, postponement of or lack of attaining a high school diploma along with their peers, as well as loss of social stability and support (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008). Allowing a young person to remain in the school of origin for as long as she or he is in foster care facilitates stability in one area of this already complicated situation, which can increase the chances of high school completion during other unstable situations, such as neglect, abuse, and multiple home placements (Finkelstein et al., 2002).

Senate Bill 1353 (SB 1353): Considering Effects of School Transfers When Making Placement Decisions, also signed into law on September 10, 2010, required the systems that serve these youth to consider each child’s educational stability as a priority when making decisions about placements and school transfers. SB 1353 specifically requires adults to make a diligent effort to avoid transferring youth during an academic year, and, in doing so, requires both the child welfare agency and the educational system
to consider the effects of school site transfer on a child’s education. The law, which supports AB 490 and AB 1933, requires that the child welfare agencies be held accountable for making decisions in the best interests of the child’s education when transferring placements. Both AB 1933 and SB 1353 were established to strengthen the educational rights of foster youth and increase the opportunities a member of this population will have of graduating with his or her peers. They also require the adults who make placement decisions to consider the negative impact school transfers can have. These two laws were intended to improve stability in the educational system for foster youth in an effort to lead to more positive outcomes.

On January 1, 2010 the governor of California signed Assembly Bill 167 (AB 167) into law, amending section 51225.3 of the California Education Code (E.C.). This bill assists foster youth who move to new school with different graduation requirements from the previous school or district. A child in his/her third or fourth year of high school may be faced with additional graduation requirements at the new school, with little or no time to complete those different courses to be able to graduate with his or her peers. Therefore, AB 167 protects their educational right to graduate on time under specific circumstances. To accomplish this, AB 167 exempts certain 11th and 12th grade students in foster care from school district graduation requirements and, instead, requires public schools to use state graduation requirements for them to receive their high school diploma. The 11th and 12th grade students who qualify under AB 167 are those who transfer to a new district, or from one high school to another within a district, and are unable to complete additional district or school requirements within a reasonable timeframe to graduate on time.
Typically, Los Angeles County school districts require completion of 210 to 230 credits from specific courses for students to receive their high school diplomas, whereas the state only requires 130 credits from specific courses. The minimum California requirements for high school graduation are the following: three years of English, two years of mathematics, three years of social science, two years of science, two years of physical education and one year of foreign language or visual and performing arts (California Department of Education [CDE], 2013). Since 2005, students are also required to pass the California High School Exit Examination to receive a high school diploma. There are, however, two other methods to receive a high school diploma or its equivalent in California: the California High School Proficiency Examination and the General Educational Development test (CDE, 2013), but neither constitutes graduation from high school.

AB 167 also requires public schools to make foster youth aware of any consequences from using AB 167 requirements, especially if meeting only the state requirements will affect their ability to gain admission to a postsecondary educational institution. The bill does not mandate that postsecondary educational institutions accept students who have not met admission requirements so each case must be thoroughly scrutinized.

In September 30, 2010, The California Fostering Connections to Success Act was signed into law as AB 12. This bill extended payment benefits and transitional support services for foster care, the Adoption Assistance Program (AAP), and the Kinship Guardianship Payment Assistance (Kin-GAP). In 2012, AB 12 was amended by Assembly Bill 212, which extended the age range for foster youth assistance. From
January 1, 2012 to January 1, 2014, this bill allowed eligible 18 year olds to remain in foster care up to age 21. However, they would become non-minor dependents within the system, just like children who are not in foster care who do not leave the home and reach full independence at the age of 18.

AB 12/212 extended services and resources to eligible foster youth to make decisions regarding housing, education, and employment. The bill required foster youth and social workers to develop a plan to help the young adults meet the goal of completing high school or an equivalent program, enrolling in a postsecondary educational institution, finding employment of at least 80 hours a month, or enrolling in a professional/career employment program. Under AB 12/212 non-minor dependents reside voluntarily in the same placement, if desired, or enter transitional housing. In addition, if the young person exits foster care, the youth can to return before the age of 21. The bill is aligned with the federal goal of providing stability for foster youth transitioning out of the system for more opportunities for positive outcomes until it expired in 2014. Table four lists legislation that supports rights for foster youth in California.

In 2013, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) restructured the way California funds education, including for students in foster care (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). The LCFF is a new state school finance system approved as part of California’s 2013-14 Budget Act. The LCFF simplifies the way schools are funded in California. California approved equal funding for school districts, charter schools, and county offices of education per student, with adjustments based on grade levels and demographic characteristics such as low income, English Language Learners, and foster youth. The
LCFF allows districts to exercise funding flexibility to better serve student needs.

Implementation of the LCFF began in the 2013-2014 school year. It is estimated by the Department of Finance that full implementation may take up to eight years (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

Table 4

*Legislation Supporting Foster Youth in California*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>U.S. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>California Assembly Bill 490 Ensuring Educational Rights for Foster</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (enacted as Public Law 110-351)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>California Assembly Bill 1933 (Permitting Students to Remain in Their School of Origin)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>California Senate Bill 1353 (Considering Effects of School Transfers When Making Placement Decisions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>California Assembly Bill 167- District Graduation Requirement Waiver for Foster Youth (enacted as Public Law: AB 167)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>California Assembly Bill 12 (California Fostering Connections to Success Act)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>California Assembly Bill 212 (amendment to AB 12) (Beall; Stats. 2010, ch. 559),</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) restructured</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The LCFF also requires school districts to develop accountability plans, known as a Local Control Accountability Plans (LCAPs), to demonstrate how education funds are used to support youth in a specific district. The LCAP is required to identify annual goals and actions aimed at implementing those goals and measure progress for student subgroups based on eight priorities set by the state. Districts that develop LCAPs are further required to solicit input from stakeholders regarding their thoughts about which goals can be most effectively implemented to help public schools reach the priorities set by the state. The LCFF and LCAPs will help schools and districts work towards closing the achievement gap between foster youth and their non-foster peers.
Educational Impact to Foster Youth Being Raised by Systems

The old proverb “It takes a village to raise a child” is an accurate statement for this particular at-risk group of youth. In fact, the metaphor of a village and its stakeholders can be seen as including caregivers, educators, social workers, mental health providers, community leaders, local and federal government agencies that provide advocacy, support, and collaborative efforts to improve a foster child’s life. Massinga and Pecora (2004) discussed the importance of stakeholders using a systems of care approach to effectively further educational efforts needed with youth in foster care due to their vulnerability and lack of the same parental advocates that their non-foster youth peers typically have. This section discusses several factors that have been shown to be outcomes for this population.

Historically Low Graduation Rate

Foster youth have various experiences while in the care of the child welfare agency, many related to their experiences within the educational system. As previously mentioned, some of those experiences are related to interactions between the two systems, which often lack collaboration. Research consistently has shown that foster youth have low rates of educational attainment that include the failure to complete high school and proceed to postsecondary schooling (Frerer et al., 2013; Jones, 2010; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). While considering which factors contribute to the low graduation rates for foster youth, the markers of academic neglect are high and consistent across the country as a whole (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008). Research also has shown that they are more likely to have academic and behavioral issues in school, along with high rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals and
performance below grade level (Rumberger et al., 1999). They are 50% more likely to repeat grades than their non-foster peers and have high rates of placement in special education programs due to diagnosis of learning disabilities or emotional disturbance (Yu, 2003). In addition, less than three percent of them enter four-year colleges (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Lips, 2007; Massinga & Pecora, 2004); therefore, they are less likely to hold a college degree than are their peers, with estimates of graduation rates ranging from one to eleven percent (Dworsky & Pérez, 2009).

In a study by Weinberg et al. (2003) that involved focus group participants from local educational and social services systems, it was reported that placement instability led to lack of school success due to inability for the foster youth to develop relationships within the school community. One of the reasons cited for such instability within the placement was the display of difficult behaviors in placement and foster parents being unable or unwilling to work with such issues, and, therefore, requesting removal of the minor from the home (Weinberg et. al.). Unless well-trained and willing foster parents can deal with the youth’s behaviors, which can be even age-appropriate adolescent behaviors, the minor can be moved from placement to placement, and school to school (Weinberg et. al.). The impact of placement instability takes a toll on the youth, yet for educators and social workers, s/he is expected to focus on school and finish high school and move on to college or work. AB 490 attempts to address this issue of instability by mandating that the school system provides school stability for a foster youth by allowing the student to remain in the school of origin or the school prior to placement change if that is in their best interest. It also requires the social services system to consider a youth’s school setting when making placement decisions to promote educational stability.
Compared to their non-foster youth peers, foster youth have lower scores on standardized tests, higher absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout rates (Frerer et al., 2013; Stuart Foundation, 2011). The common problems for this group are the frequent school transfers and instability, persistent low expectations, and lack of specialized instruction. Research shows that education is a key factor in determining whether these students successfully transition into adulthood, but, since so many of them do not complete their education, they are at a greater risk for poor life outcomes (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013).

**Poor Life Outcomes**

When looking at the repercussions for foster youth who lack adequate education, the concerns relate to the possibility of poor life outcomes. Lips’ (2007) work has shown that adults who were formerly in foster care are more likely than the general population to succumb to “poor life outcomes,” such as poor educational achievement, few career options, mental and physical health issues, need for government assistance, or even incarceration. This population is at a higher risk of not completing high school due to numerous problems and challenges commonly faced within the educational system as a result of home and school placement instability among other issues related to the reasons they were removed from their homes in the first place. These poor educational circumstances can lead to poor academic achievement, which can cause problems for them as adults, ranging from limited employment skills, dependency on welfare services, criminal acts and incarceration, abuse of narcotics and alcohol, and mental health issues in comparison to the general population (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services, Inc., 2008; Lips, 2007). Lips (2007) further
found that women who were placed in foster care are more likely to become pregnant at an early age and have their children also placed in foster care. These poor life outcomes, which have been reported for more than 50% of emancipated adults, directly affect local government and communities in areas such as higher crime rates, incarceration rates, and homelessness amongst this group (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Counseling, Lips, 2007; Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013).

There is often a lack of collaborative efforts among the systems that work directly with this group to resolve this continuous crisis. Often, physical and/or emotional trauma is the reason children placed in care by the child welfare agency. Through the years, the increase of reported incidents has not only affected the child welfare agency’s ability to adequately provide support, but also affects the educational systems that must deal with the aftermath of the trauma within their setting (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

**Advocacy and Systems of Care for Foster Youth**

A major barrier to educational achievement for foster youth is the lack of advocacy by a single person concerned with the child’s best interests, one who also has the authority and accountability for his or her educational outcomes (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Leone et al., 2010; Massinga & Pecora, 2004). Although these young people are provided numerous supportive agents in the form of foster parents, social worker(s), counselors, lawyer(s), and some birth parents who continue to be involved, these adults and professionals typically are focused on different aspects of the child’s life and development. These aspects include things such as enrolling them in school in a timely manner, investigating alleged allegations that lead to
placement, and trying to meet court mandates for family reunification services.

The challenge of addressing and attaining healthier adult outcomes for this population involves a “systems of care approach,” as described by Massinga and Pecora (2004). The “systems of care approach” is aimed at providing services through partnerships to create supports to meet their multiple needs. This approach is based on interagency collaboration and was put in the place in the 1980’s to improve access and the availability of services while reducing duplication of services to best meet the needs of children with serious mental health challenges as well as those of their families (Stroul & Friedman, 1986; 1996). The systems of care approach was developed to facilitate coordinating supports and services for this specific population of youth who receive such services within the community and school settings. This concept was efficient in bringing together systems to effectively adapt national policy and improve service systems across the board for this population.

In taking the systems of care approach with foster youth, their educational efforts would be made a priority with the local government and community, along with the educational, child welfare, and dependency court systems. Since these youth face numerous disadvantages due to the numerous support services in their lives, that lack effective collaborative efforts to truly examine their needs, the systems of care approach could serve to make connections among the different groups. Identifying and supporting key factors aimed at coordinating support services and resources would enable them to regularly attend school and be prepared to learn with fewer daily obstacles (Massinga & Percora, 2004). By building a support network of trained professionals and care givers for foster youth, genuine and appropriate advocacy can be provided to affect whether
they complete high school. Some typical issues for this population that could be addressed with a systems of care approach are the following: frequent change of schools, lack of up to date educational records, appointment of educational rights holders, absenteeism issues that affect daily learning, educational gaps due to instability in school setting(s), severe behavioral issues that may go unaddressed but cause frequent placement transfers, much needed referrals for mental health services, tutoring, enrichment, and other educational supports to support academic performance.

“There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them read my report card or calls my teacher” (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 6). This statement demonstrates the feelings of many foster youth as they work their way through the educational system. Without collaboration and coordination of the different systems and services working together, there can be barriers to educational achievement (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning). All individuals and professionals within the systems should be working in the best interest of the student, as his/her outcomes are destined to have an impact on all systems eventually. If all systems work together to support the youth’s academic and social-emotional needs, there will be healthier outcomes as they reach adulthood (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning; Finkelstein et al., 2002). Figure one shows the nested systems that surround these young people as they were envisioned for this study.
Families. Although foster youth are often removed from the care of their biological parents or guardians due to alleged abuse and/or neglect, biological parents maintain their educational rights, which need to be upheld while in the care of the state (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2010). Therefore, as a youth gets put in placement and transitions to not only a new home setting, but, typically, a new school setting, it becomes important for those involved to effectively navigate the necessary educational services and supports.

Navigating these systems involves collaboration with the family, which means working with the parents, guardians, or foster parents, and helping to stabilize the best educational setting possible for him or her. This would further involve getting the
youth’s educational records/transcripts, credits, individualized education plans, and/or enrolling a minor in school within a timely manner, actions that are typically taken care of by the family (Finkelstein et al, 2002; Weinberg et al, 2003). Since some biological parents and/or legal guardians continue to have rights for their children placed in foster care, it is their advocacy for the child’s educational attainment that needs to be supported by the child welfare agency and educational systems until or unless this is altered by the courts (Steib, 2004). It is also important for the foster parents to get involved with the educational process to assist with transitions or educational services needed for the youth in their care.

**Legal system.** The education of youth in California falls under the jurisdiction of the county, with the main responsibility placed on the legal system to support children since the courts “removed them from their parents’ care to keep them safe and provide for the overall well-being, which includes ensuring that they succeed educationally” (Leone & Weinberg, 2012, p. 7). In a systems of care approach, the legal system can be represented by the juvenile court system as represented by judges, youth lawyers, and court appointed special advocates (Stroul et al., 2010). This system of professionals works to provide lawful examination of allegations of abuse and neglect to the fullest, for the best interest of the youth in care, as well as to provide stability, appropriate care, and advocacy through delegation of duties and supports.

Another important area that falls under the purview of the courts is education. The legal system should assist with and address any barriers the minor faces so that she or he receives the most appropriate and least restrictive education. The legal system must also hold educational and child welfare agencies accountable and responsible due to
legislative mandates (AB 490, 2003). While the legal system holds the most authority over other systems that work with this population of children, their mandates and recommendations for intervention supports and services are executed through delegation of others; therefore, the legal system makes an indirect contribution to improve the outcomes for foster youth by holding other systems accountable. The delegation of services typically goes to social workers or educational advocates. Therefore, collaboration among the legal and other systems of care is needed to adequately support these students as they work through experiences related to their removal from home. The Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program is a court-ordered, collaborative service provider that attempts to provide such services (Shea et al., 2008). This program brings the systems of care together to make decisions in the best interests of the children, and its members are seen as mentors or guides. This program works to give the youth a voice and to advocate for their social-emotional and educational needs.

**Child welfare system.** While in placement, the monitoring of the foster youth’s safety, physical and emotional well-being, mandated court orders, and educational achievement, falls upon the professionals within the child welfare agency. These individuals work to provide legal and educational support to manage the youth’s quality of life while s/he is in the care of the state (Malm et al., 2001). One major area within educational mandates that needs to be addressed is maintaining an appropriate school placement that best meets the needs of the youth and provides him or her with stability (AB 490, 2003). This involves social workers looking for placements within the same community or near the youth’s current school setting prior to placement or change in placement, as required by AB 490. They also work with school districts and school sites
to provide immediate enrollment even if the student lacks typical requirements, such as school records, immunizations, and/or school uniforms. Child welfare agencies aim to address educational gaps within the school setting by requesting assessments, appropriate grade level placements, and supports for educational attainment. In order to provide appropriate advocacy, there is a need for appropriate training within the educational field (Malm et al.).

One example of this type of collaboration happened in 1998, when the Los Angeles County child welfare agency was provided assistance and training for social workers to identify and support foster youth educational problems and needs more thoroughly through the Education Initiative Project (Zetlin et al, 2006). This collaborative effort brought the child welfare agency, a large local education agency (LEA), and a small nonprofit law office together with the goal of providing appropriate support for some of the numerous and complicated educational issues that arose while working directly with these youth. Such efforts bring hope that, with collaborative care and advocacy, the student is more likely to have an appropriate educational experience.

This same collaboration also found it imperative to have educational liaisons actively placed at the child welfare agency offices to provide direct assistance and support to social workers to overcome difficult educational obstacles and address concerns for children in their caseload (Zetlin et al, 2006). LEAs provide initial and ongoing training to educational liaisons to offer the most useful services, as well as public school and community resources, to best meet the educational needs of these young people. The role of the educational liaison includes: locating school records, problems with enrollment, lack of appropriate special educational services, inappropriate
school placement, and/or discipline actions like suspensions and expulsions. (Zetlin et al, 2006). These services and supports are made available when social workers make a referral to the educational liaison in their service area. Educational liaisons continue to serve and support social workers in Los Angeles County. However, with the growing caseloads and educational struggles of foster youth, it becomes difficult to meet the needs of all the students, so there is a continued decline in educational attainment for this population (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office 2010; Vacca, 2008).

**Educational system.** “Of all adult groups, school staff may provide the strongest link between foster children and their formal educations” (Finkelstein et al., 2002, p. 31). School staff, educators, and peers at school are the other group of individuals, aside from the foster parents in the placement setting, who work most frequently with these students. Therefore, their advocacy and relationship to the child’s academic needs and support are vital parts of either their success or their failure. Typically, school staff members tend to be unaware a student is in placement or receiving child welfare services (Finkelstein, 2002). Teachers and counselors often see firsthand the child’s academic ability and the need for educational support with classroom assignments, interactions, and also have access to his/her school records. Therefore, the educational system’s knowledge and push for assessments, intervention academic services, and support is imperative to successful educational experiences and high school completion, as well as for their entering and completing a postsecondary education.

The educational system should collaborate with the child welfare agency and family systems to provide the student with assessments, special educational services,
and/or trying to complete school records when s/he has been enrolled at several schools (AB 490, 2003). Districts also have a designated educational liaison for their foster youth population who works to collaborate with school sites within the district.

**Societal impacts.** The ultimate goal of all the systems of care is to have these particular subgroup of students’ successfully complete high school and possibly college to enter the workforce and positively contribute to society. Research has shown that a high percentage of former foster youth end up homeless, incarcerated, receiving public assistance, and/or being unemployed as compared to their peers (Frerer et al., 2013); former foster youth are also noticeably overrepresented in California prisons as in comparison to their peers (Frerer et al., 2013). These negative life outcomes have an impact on our communities and systems by weighing heavily on funding and budgeting for such interventions and services to support or reverse these outcomes (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Lips, 2007; Frerer et al., 2013).

It has also been reported that, for about half of this population, these negative outcomes become a reality two to four years after exiting the system (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Peters et al., 2012). On average, this means that, for every young person who ages out, taxpayers and communities pay $300,000 in social costs for things like public assistance, incarceration, and lost wages to a community over that person's lifetime (Peters et al., 2012). Such large expenses can cost California billions every year, due to the high numbers of foster youth in this state.

**Building Bridges between Systems**

“As foster children move through the educational system, they encounter additional systemic and structural barriers beyond the profound trauma to which they
already have been exposed (and which, in turn, in may not be addressed properly)" (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 6). These traumas, such as abuse and neglect, have been described by research as the reasons for the achievement gaps and high dropout rates for foster youth (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Casey et al., 2003; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; McKlindon et al., 2011; Vacca, 2008). The child welfare and public education systems are the main agents directly responsible for supporting these young people. Providing social services and education is the primary role of state and local government. In some circumstances, the federal government is also involved in specific program funding to deal with their poor educational outcomes that are seen nationwide.

One example of the federal system getting involved is with The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 (P.L. 110-351, Fostering Connections), which required the local state and child welfare agencies to collaborate and coordinate with educational systems, and also provided the state with federal reimbursement funds for their local child welfare agencies (Advocates for Children of New York, Inc., 2008). Legislation such as The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 can lead to collaborative and coordination efforts between systems to best meet the needs of foster youth. These efforts can also promote educational stability and successful outcomes by providing more resources through federal funding. The outcomes of youth within the child welfare and educational systems are more than local issues, but “it is important to note that this neglect is not the product of individual failings, but systemic ones” (Center for Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 19).
A major deficiency that both the educational and child welfare agencies face when working with the youth under their care is the lack of important information about the child, because both systems maintain their own databases with no linkage or ability to share information as needed (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008). The information that the child’s school and/or social worker has access to, can assist in outlining which courses they have already completed towards graduation, who holds educational rights, whether s/he needs special education assessments, trauma experienced by the child that necessitated placement, and prior mental health services. All these factors contribute to educational outcomes and the necessity for specific services to be provided by each system. “To complicate matters, federal laws place restrictions on the exchange of individual student information between education and social welfare system” (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 18).

Several states have put programs in place to build bridges between systems and support this population. In 2006, Arizona addressed issues related to the lack of educational success of these students through legislation to create the nation’s first K-12 tuition scholarship program for them. This program provided an estimated 500 foster youth with $5,000 each for tuition for private school in order to attain a more stable education without disruptions if their home setting changed (Lips, 2007). The state stakeholders found that stability and enrichment can also assist greatly upon emancipation. From 2005 through 2007, California made efforts to improve the collaboration and communication between the child welfare agency and the educational systems that serve these youth by providing over $22.5 million to support services within county offices of education. Both of these examples show efforts made by states and
systems to build bridges between systems that support and serve this population to better meet their educational and lifelong needs.

The exchange and collection of education data relative to foster youth is also imperative for success within the educational system and in an out-of-home placement. “By sharing data more effectively, collaborating to make school stability a reality, and giving the youngest foster children the interventions that give them a chance to be truly ready for school, the full implementation of many of these recommendations would alter the education and adult self-sufficiency prospects for the 74,000 children in California foster system” (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008, p. 17). The importance of developing partnerships among school, family, and community assists in improving school programs and climate, which could help these youth succeed in school and support positive outcomes.

Massinga and Pecora (2004) state that needed improvements include an “emphasis on continuity of school placements, site based case management and training, coordinated educational advice and supports, mental health services, family advocacy training, and shared educational records” (p.161). There is also a need for educational supports to assist with academic achievement, such as tutoring programs, enrichment programs, and programs to help foster youth be successful in and out of school. Local government and community leadership are also needed to advocate for and allocate funding for such services and supports to improve successful educational outcomes for our foster youth. Program and support services such as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and LEAs that provide advocacy services and trainings to systems of care for foster youth, as well as direct intervention services to assist with meeting the best
interests of the youth, are effective approaches to collaborative efforts to ensure more successful outcomes by making educational attainment a priority and a responsibility for all individuals and professionals involved in the care these children.

**Summary and Conclusion**

This chapter described the development of the foster care system in the United States, from a local charity organization into a nationwide federal mandate for each state to meet the needs of their youth’s safety and well-being. It further discussed the reasons the foster care system was implemented in the early years for homeless and neglected youth and how it continues to be extremely needed with abuse and neglect of youth in the U.S. The U.S. is estimated to have over 400,000 foster youth on any given day, while California serves the largest number of foster youth in the nation (Needell, 2014). The literature shares the relationship between California’s large foster youth population and their extremely low high school graduation rate. Since almost half of these students do not graduate from high school (NDACAN, 2012), they are at-risk for poor outcomes as adults, such as poor job opportunities or unemployment, the need for public assistance, and possible homelessness and/or incarceration (Frerer at al., 2013). In order to address these concerns, it is important for all systems serving these students to work collaboratively to meet their academic needs and general well-being.

The research on foster youth describes different systems that make up the support framework that assists minors while they are in the care of the state (Massinga & Pecora, 2004). These youth receive support services from the following systems: family (biological or foster family) system, legal system, child welfare agency system, and public educational system, in different capacities for their personal and educational
rights. Even with so many systems supporting youth, a majority of them still fall through the educational cracks and do not complete school, often due to lack of collaboration between and among support groups (Massinga & Pecora, 2004; Weinberg et al., 2014). The systems of care approach (Massinga & Pecora) has been shown to bridge the gaps among the different systems and the services they provide.

Some studies describe how education liaisons bridge the gap between agencies and systems for foster youth using a variety of models (Weinberg et al., 2009; Weinberg et al., 2014). Some of these models, such as those with lower caseloads, may limit barriers as a result of interagency collaboration and may build relationships with the youth, which in turn support positive outcomes (Weinberg et al., 2009; Weinberg et al., 2014). Collaboration between the systems that serve foster youth, along with efficient data sharing between agencies further helps to eliminate barriers that impede success (Weinberg et al., 2009; Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

Leone and Weinberg (2012) describe the importance of sharing data amongst agencies that serve foster youth through the use of databases linked across agencies. Such data sharing can eliminate “lag time when students move into a new foster or group home and/or into a new school” (Leone & Weinberg, 2012, p. 45). Although some counties in California have shown progress towards sharing data between agencies and their authorized users, it is not yet a common tool used within Los Angeles County, home to the largest foster youth population (Leone & Weinberg, 2012).

Research on foster youth’s extremely low high school completion rate and poor life outcomes (Frerer et al., 2013) points to their voices are largely absent from the research in terms of their own experiences within the different systems. The voices of
their own experiences, reflections, and stories through all of these systems need to be heard by educators and other professionals to fill the gap that continues to cause fewer than 50 percent of them to graduate from secondary school. The following chapter details the methods used for this study, which explored the personal stories, experiences, and reflections of former foster youth. These stories address how being a student while in the systems affects school completion. Their voices and their perceptions of the systems, educators and other professionals who provided services to them, as well as the legal and educational policies that they experienced as a student in foster care, serve to address the gap in the existing literature.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This narrative inquiry explored the personal stories and experiences of adults who were placed in the foster care system as children by local child welfare agencies and who received educational services from the local school system while trying to work towards completing high school within a local urban setting. The focus of this study was to collect the stories of the adults’ experiences and reflections from their time in foster care, and to examine the obstacles, challenges, supports, and/or stories of their academic outcomes while in placement. These stories assist in further understanding of this particular subgroup of student’s high rates of dropping out and of lack of completing the requirements for a high school diploma in the U.S.

Research Design

In an effort to uncover the experiences that former foster youth had with the social services and educational systems, a select group of adult former foster youth was the focus of this narrative study, the researcher gathered their stories to look for evidence of the ways they were supported or not supported while in the system. Narrative inquiry was chosen due to the nature of the main research question, which explores human experiences and personal reflections first-hand through storytelling. According to Clandinin (2006), narrative inquiry is storytelling, which helps to create meaning in our lives and supports the building of communities around personal experiences. Narrative research relies on the use of tools such as written field notes, recorded and transcribed interviews, and other text-based and visual data such as notes and e-mails and photographs that help engage the participant to unravel and reflect on his or her story. By
gathering participants’ individual stories through their reflections and experiences, researchers can examine the “larger social, cultural and institutional narratives within which they live and have lived” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 51) to examine social issues such as foster youth and their poor rates of high school graduation.

Within this narrative research design, this investigation explored the means by which the respondents negotiated and navigated through the educational and legal policies related to the foster care and the educational systems. This study further explored the efforts of the various systems (educational, child welfare agency, and legal) to assist them to succeed academically by supporting their high school completion, as well as to prepare them for meaningful professional opportunities following graduation and their exit from the system.

This study tells the collective narratives/stories of adult former foster youth. The collective narratives approach examines stories with similar themes across participants (Prins et al., 2013; Salzer, 1998). This study used collective narrative practice methods (Yuen, 2011) within the context of a narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006). Rather than construct case studies or individual stories, this study created collective stories across the participants within the context of their lives as foster youth to provide a better understanding of their experiences in the system (Denborough, 2008). These stories were told from the perspective of each participant, based on his/her experiences, but, since they are collective across participants, they address broader social issues that were common to most, if not all, of them (Denborough).

Clandinin (2006) describes narrative inquiry as “an old practice” that allows the researcher to step into the study as an outsider to observe the powerful story lived and
being told by the individual for others to gain knowledge from that experience and phenomena (p. 44). While attempting to intervene in the epidemic of foster youth who do not complete high school, we must first understand what is or not being done presently or what has been done in the past through the eyes of those who have been through the system.

In order for the systems that serve foster youth to intervene in increasing graduation rates, they must have true insight to the youth’s experiences within their systems in order to correct or adjust. Yuen (2011) describes his success with narrative inquiry by using storytelling and personal experiences with young men in an urban school in terms of helping them move from turmoil to hope within their storytelling, both individually and collectively. This study used individual and collective stories to develop the themes that emerged from the stories to identify risk factors and improve graduation rates amongst this population of students. The main texts for this study were the transcripts from the individual interviews, which became the basis for the stories.

The following research question and sub-questions guided the research process and influenced the course of the study:

1. What do the stories of adults who grew up in foster care system tell us about its impact on school completion in an urban setting?
   a. What are the participants’ perceptions about the structures of the child welfare agency that helped or hindered them from completing school?
   b. What are the participants’ perceptions about the structures of the public education system that helped or hindered them from completing school?
c. How do participants perceive the collaboration between the two systems helped or hindered them in completing school?

d. Who helped or hindered the participants in completing school?

e. What did the participants do to help themselves complete school?

Research Methodology

During a qualitative research study of this type, the aim of the researcher is to build a complex holistic picture through the analysis of data collected in a natural setting, and to convey participants’ views in detail (Creswell, 1998). In order to achieve the proposed study’s objectives and develop an understanding of foster youths’ lived experiences, this inquiry, guided by its research questions, relied primarily on the interviews with adults who were formerly in the foster care system. Through participant interviews, it was possible to access their lived experiences and the reflections of stories, which allows outsiders a different perspective of the obstacles, struggles, and circumstances experienced by the participants.

The study also gathered information via the analysis of primary and secondary school documents and artifacts that were provided by the participants. Not all participants chose to share or had such documents or artifacts available. The documents and artifacts assisted the researcher in shaping interview questions and also provided insight into the participants’ academic histories, grades, attendance patterns, number of schools attended, support services, assessments completed or suggested, and behavioral histories. These documents also assisted the participants to reflect on an earlier period in their educational experiences, which some participants had forgotten or overlooked. This
was helpful, since many of the participants moved around frequently and had difficulty recalling all the schools they attended.

**Context of the Research Site**

The study was conducted in Los Angeles County. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2013), Los Angeles County continues to be a diverse community within California, leading the state with 25% of the state’s population residing within it. Los Angeles County includes 48% Hispanic, 27% White, 14% Asian, and 9% African American residents, with 35% of them being immigrants to the U.S. and 57% speaking a language other than English in their homes. The median household income for residents of Los Angeles County, at the time of this study, was $28,000, and 16% of residents live below poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Los Angeles County is home to the largest percentage of foster youth in the U.S. In 2013 Los Angeles County had 19,899 children in foster care, totaling 34% of the 58,699 foster youth in the state (Needell, 2014). Given this large percentage, Los Angeles County was an appropriate research site for this study. Students in foster care in California are likely to be African-American, classified with a disability, change schools during a school year, enroll in the lowest performing schools, and struggle with English Language Arts, Elementary Math, Algebra I and II (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

The participants in this study all lived in Los Angeles County and attended public school locally. The areas included the following and varied depending on whether they had numerous or relatively few placements: Carson, Gardena, South Los Angeles, Pasadena, Long Beach, North Los Angeles and Wilmington. Many participants had short placements or could not recall cities relatively easily when asked; others may have been
placed outside Los Angeles County for a brief time. However, all participants spent the majority of their academic careers in Los Angeles County. The participants represent the diversity and demographics of Los Angeles County very well.

**Research Participants**

In order to explore and document the experiences of the respondents, this study used a purposive sample of six participants who met the following criteria: 1) participants were 18 years or older; 2) participants had attended public school in Los Angeles County while in the foster care system; and 3) participants either completed high school or dropped out of public school. Participants were recruited through professional educator networks and participant referrals by their peers, and then prescreened via telephone for the study criteria. The sample included five women and one man from various ethnic groups. They ranged in age from 18 to 24. In addition, three of the participants agreed to provide access to a supportive agent who worked with them while they were in the foster care system: a social worker, a court-appointed lawyer, and a tutor/mentor. These individuals were invited to participate in the study as informants.

Six participants agreed to be interviewed for this study: Rose, Marquis, Melissa, Monique, Sparkle, and Maria. All participants’ names in this study are pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality and to keep their personal stories private; the names that are used were chosen to reflect the actual names of the participants without revealing their identities. There were also three supportive agents who acted as informants for the study. One participant, Rose, identified her social worker, who was assigned to her case from the time she was placed in the foster care system. Another participant, Melissa, identified her prior court-appointed lawyer who worked with her as a minor and whom she
currently views as her mentor. The third participant, Maria, identified a tutor/mentor who worked as a case manager at the campus from which she graduated. All three support agents agreed to be informants with the participants’ approval. Each respondent is described below briefly that comes from the shared information given at the interviews with the participants.

Through the support of two different transitional housing programs, all participants of this study lived in the same type of two-bedroom apartment complex situated throughout Los Angeles County. None of the participants shared living quarters with each other. Apartment locations included Northeast Los Angeles and West Covina; the two transitional housing programs were both located in Los Angeles.

**Rose**

Rose is an 18-year-old female of Mexican-American descent currently living in transitional housing, which is a program that assists foster youth with housing after the age of 18 years old. She graduated from continuation high school, after being removed from the local high school due to her inability to concentrate on her schoolwork. Rose shared that the inability to focus on schooling mostly came as a result of the abuse that occurred while she was in and out of the foster care system. Rose entered the foster care system as an infant and was eventually adopted by her foster parents. However, she later returned to the system due to Rose alleging abuse occurring to her in her adoptive home. Rose has had a total of seven placements. She identified her social worker for the past few years as her supportive agent for this study, and allowed the researcher to interview her social worker as an informant without her presence. Rose preferred we speak without her being present for the interview. The informant interview was held at a child welfare
agency office and the informant was very knowledgeable about Rose’s history and her personal life as well.

Marquis

Marquis is a 23-year-old African American male currently living in transitional housing. He was unable to complete all the requirements needed for his high school diploma while attending secondary school. Marquis entered the foster care system with his two older sisters at the age of four, and remained in and out of it until he was emancipated at the age of 18. Marquis had a total of 12 placements throughout his youth.

Melissa

Melissa is a 24-year-old African American and Caucasian female who recently exited transitional housing due to her age. Melissa entered the system, along with her older sister, at the age of three and five years old. She and her sister were transitioned into an adoptive family household after a few years, but were rejected by the adoptive family when the girls would not embrace them as their parents. Melissa would have 12 placements before emancipating at 18 years of age. Melissa shared that she was an honor student in middle school and received a scholarship to attend a local prestigious high school, but, due to a long battle with depression resulting from sexual abuse while in foster care, she stopped attending and caring about her academic goal to graduate high school. Melissa was only one course short of earning her high school diploma; she never retook the course, which she still regrets six years later.

Melissa identified her mentor for the past few years as her supportive agent and allowed the researcher to interview her mentor as an informant without her presence.
The informant interview was held at the mentor’s law office, and the informant was very knowledgeable about Melissa’s history and personal life.

**Monique**

Monique is a 19-year-old African American female currently living in transitional housing. She graduated from a local high school in the South Los Angeles area, and she also received special education support services throughout her middle and high school years. Monique entered the system when she was three years old and was able to identify more than 20 different placements until emancipation. These 20 different placements included various foster homes, group homes, juvenile placements, and shelters that were mostly within Los Angeles County.

**Sparkle**

Sparkle is an 18-year-old Caucasian transgender female currently living in transitional housing. She was placed in the system at the age of 12, after being physically and emotionally abused by her widowed father who did not accept her transition to female. Sparkle was originally placed in foster care in Northern California until she ran away and took a bus to the Skid Row area of Los Angeles when she was 16. She did not graduate from high school but recently began a GED program as an adult. Sparkle had a total of 19 placements.

**Maria**

Maria is an 18-year-old female who was placed in foster care shortly after immigrating to the United States from Mexico and currently lives in transitional housing. Maria was missing 100 credits towards her high school diploma when she started her junior year at a new high school and in a new placement. Maria attended the local high
school and the adult school to make up the credits to graduate on time after being motivated that she could work hard and still graduate even though she was far behind. Maria entered the foster care system when she was 16 years old, after her mother was deported to Mexico and she and her younger brother initially stayed with family friends without any involvement from child welfare system. Maria had a total of three placements. Maria identified her tutor/case manager who supported her during her junior and senior years of high school as her supportive agent for this study and allowed the researcher to interview her tutor/case manager as an informant while she was present. Maria preferred to be a part of the informant’s interview. The informant interview was held at Maria’s old high school, where her former tutor/case manager still works. Table 5 summarizes demographics of the participants.

Table 5

Foster Youth Participant Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Marquis</th>
<th>Melissa</th>
<th>Monique</th>
<th>Sparkle</th>
<th>Maria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>African American/African American</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>Mexican</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Years in Foster Care</td>
<td>6**</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Foster Care Placements*</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduated High School</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individualized Education Program</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This number only indicates the number of placements that participants were able to identify or remember.
**Rose was adopted by her first foster parents when she was four, but left their care 12 years later.
Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began and ended in the month of March 2014 and was qualitative in nature. Individual interviews were the primary data source, while artifact/document analysis served as an additional source of information relevant to the inquiry. Data collection and analysis were conducted in a three-stage process: first the respondents participated in three interviews; next artifacts and/or documents were analyzed; and, finally, data analysis was conducted to develop the collective stories of the participants.

Interviews

This narrative research study used individual interviews to grasp the story of each participant’s life experiences and to gain insight into the specific research topic investigated (Creswell, 1998). This study examined the participants’ personal journeys through the educational and child welfare systems. Since each participant is a former child/youth in Los Angeles County, each individual shared a unique story that focused on his/her human experiences while in care. These stories can help educators and other professionals better understand those experiences by reading about and learning from them. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) describe the significance of narrative studies in education, as they are able to construct and reconstruct personal and social stories that share the way humans experience the world so that others can learn from those phenomena. This study focused on capturing the experiences and voices of former foster youth and their experiences within the child welfare agency educational systems. Their voices can provide us with a better understanding about how those systems support or challenge them as they seek to complete high school.
Individual, in-person interviews were the primary data collection method for this study. Before the in-person interviews began, the researcher conducted a 15-minute pre-screening interview over the telephone with each participant to review the purpose and requirements for participation in the study. The researcher further discussed how optional data, such as artifacts and support agent interviews, would also assist with the accuracy of the individual stories and experiences.

Narrative interviews were used to gather the specific story behind each participant’s experiences (Chase, 2011). The interviews, which involved repeated interactions with the participants to uncover a greater understanding of their experiences (Chase, 2011), were intended to capture individual stories through descriptions of their perceptions and experiences in the foster care system. Each participant took part in three individual face-to-face interviews, which each lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. During each interview, the researcher used an interview protocol that contained semi-structured and open-ended questions to allow room for questions to be skipped or shifted due to an individual participant’s responses (Appendix). While the initial intent was to ask a standard set of questions, as the respondents told their stories, the interview sessions often went in different directions. Chase (2011) argues that interview guides are not always useful in narrative interviews, as the researcher follows the participant’s story as it is told through his or her eyes. Rather than gathering answers to specific questions, the researcher wanted to gather *big stories* (Freeman, 2006) to allow the participants to not only tell their stories, but also to reflect on critical events that happened while they were in foster care.
The first interview was used for the researcher to establish rapport (Spradley, 1979) with each of the participants in order to encourage them to tell their stories. This initial interview consisted primarily of questions about background information and interview questions in Appendix asked in a conversational manner. The second interview was held on a different day and time from the first interview, and continued to complete interview questions from Appendix, as well as focusing on specific questions and additional probing questions. The third interview was completed with each of the six participants, and reviewed their participation and experience within the study; participants were also asked if they wanted to identify supportive agents to be interviewed on their behalf. Three of the six participants wanted to include their supportive agent as an informant in the study. Two of those interviews occurred individually with the informant, and the third included the original participant, due to each participant’s comfort level and availability. Further follow-up questions were resolved through phone and/or e-mail conversations.

The semi-structured interview protocol included a specific set of open-ended questions asked of all participants and allowed for follow-up and probing questions. The interview questions were situated within the literature on foster youth high school graduation rates, educational and state policies, attachment theory, resilience theory, and theoretical models relative to their high school graduation. To capture an understanding of attachment and resilience theories, questions that address those theories were adapted from the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990) and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003). The interview questions were intended to facilitate participants to tell the stories of their life experiences in terms of social, cultural,
and educational issues in their educational and social services systems which lead them to their current standing as a graduate or non-graduate former foster youth. Using an adult attachment scale (Collins & Reed, 1990) and a resilience scale (Connor et al., 2003) to assist in formulating the questions helped explore how participants navigated through both child welfare agency and educational systems. Respondents identified the support or barriers to their educational attainment.

All interviews were audio recorded to ensure accurate data collection of the participants’ stories. Field notes were also collected during interviews and anecdotal/reflective notes were made after each session to capture personal thoughts and develop follow-up questions for later interviews. These notes also assisted with the final data collection and analysis. All audio recordings were transcribed and the participants were asked to review the transcripts for accuracy. Interview transcripts were organized by participants’ pseudonyms, dates of interviews, and other significant information in regards to individual interview sessions for the most accurate collection of data throughout the course of the study.

Informant interviews. Three participants were able to identify a support agent who met with the researcher either alone or with the participant. The questions for these interviews were developed based on the original interview questions and the responses given by the participants. The support agents served as informants; therefore, these interviews were informal and served more as member checks rather than data collection activities. Interviews last one to two hours and each informant had to sign a release form. Field notes were also taken during these tape-recorded interviews.
Document and Artifact Analysis

All six participants were asked to voluntarily provide any artifacts and/or documents to the researcher that might assist with gathering their stories during their time in placement and the educational system, such as report cards, transcripts, or individualized foster care plans. These artifacts and documents were examined with the participants during the second and third interview sessions and assisted in developing probing questions to extend the interviews. The documents/artifacts also assisted in the analysis of the oral stories that were told and helped the participants with the chronological staging of their stories (Clandinin, 2006). Examining the documents and artifacts further assisted with comparisons and contradictions in the literature and actual real life experiences of former foster youth.

Member Checks

As a means of establishing credibility, all participants were given multiple opportunities to check and validate their individual stories based on the experiences that were described during the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each participant reviewed his or her interview transcriptions and individual stories created from the three interviews in addition to the informant interviews. Participants were able to provide feedback, critique, change, edit, and provide further details for their personal stories and experiences throughout the study, but particularly during member checks.

Data Collection for Each Participant

For this narrative study, it was imperative to retrieve as much data from the participants to assist with the accuracy of their individual stories and experiences. Participants were encouraged to provide such artifacts to the researcher if these were
available and if they were willing to provide them. Three participants, Rose, Marquis, and Melissa, no longer had such documents available and/or declined to share them. All participants were also asked if they had a supportive agent who would be willing to assist with telling their stories. However for the purpose of this study, it was not required for participants to provide artifacts or support agents to tell their stories or experiences. The following sections describe the specific data collection procedures that were used with each participant.

**Rose.** Rose, 18 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour interviews, which were completed at Rose’s transitional housing apartment in the common area, per her request and comfort level. Rose identified and authorized a support agent to serve as an informant for the study. The researcher met with Rose’s county social worker at her office per the social worker’s request, and as agreed to by Rose. Lastly, Rose was unable to provide any artifacts. Rose reviewed the draft of her story via email and telephone and was provided the final draft of her narrative via email and hardcopy by mail.

**Marquis.** Marquis, 23 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour interviews. Two of the interviews were held in a private room at the transitional housing program office where Marquis receives support services, and the third interview was completed at his transitional housing apartment in the common area, per his request. Marquis’ first interview was accidently deleted from the audio recorder, but most of the interview was recovered through re-asking questions and using notes taken during the original interview.
Marquis did not identify a particular support agent for the study and did not provide any artifacts. However, he did share photos of his son and two biological siblings during the third interview at his home. Marquis reviewed the draft of his story over email and telephone and was provided a final draft of his narrative story via email and hardcopy by mail.

**Melissa.** Melissa, 24 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour interviews. All three interviews were held in a private room at the transitional housing program office where Melissa was employed. Melissa requested interviews to be held there so she was able to complete them during her extended lunch.

Melissa identified a support agent for the study who became an informant for her individual story. Melissa’s support agent was a currently active mentor in her life and was once her legal counsel when she was a minor in the foster care system. The researcher met with the support agent, Melissa’s mentor, at her home, per her mentor’s request. Melissa asked the researcher and mentor to meet without her. Melissa did not locate or provide any artifacts. Melissa reviewed her story over email and telephone and was provided a final draft of her narrative story via email and hardcopy by mail.

**Monique.** Monique, 19 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour interviews. All three of the interviews were held in a private room at the transitional housing program office where Monique receives support services, per her request. Monique did not identify a particular support agent for the study and provided artifacts, an individualized educational plan and a life skills training plan, to use as another data source in the study. Melissa reviewed the draft of her story over email and telephone and was provided a final draft of her narrative story via email and hardcopy by mail.
Sparkle. Sparkle, 18 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour hour interviews. Two of the interviews were held in a private room at the transitional housing program office where she receives support services, and the third interview was completed at her actual transitional housing apartment in the common area, per her request. Sparkle did not identify a particular support agent for the study but located and provided various artifacts, such as an individualized educational plan, high school transcripts, attendance record, and school records, to use as another data source in the study. Sparkle identifies herself as a female transgender, and, therefore, both male and female names were on the artifacts she provided for this study. Sparkle reviewed the draft of her story over email and telephone and was provided a final draft of her narrative story via email and hardcopy by mail.

Maria. Maria, 18 years old, participated in a total of three one- to two-hour hour interviews, which were completed at Maria’s transitional housing apartment in the common area, per her request and comfort level. Maria was four months pregnant during the interview process. Maria identified and authorized a support agent for the study: her high school mentor/tutor. The researcher met with him at his office per his request. Maria asked to be present when the researcher and mentor/tutor met and attended the meeting. Maria located and provided artifacts, such as report cards and high school transcripts, to use as another data source in the study. Maria also reviewed the draft of her story over email and telephone and was provided a final draft of her narrative story via email and hardcopy by mail. Table 6 summarizes the data that were collected from each participant.
Table 6

Data Collected for Each Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Marquis</th>
<th>Melissa</th>
<th>Monique</th>
<th>Sparkle</th>
<th>Maria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 Interviews</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field Notes &amp; Memos</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Informants</td>
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<tr>
<td>Member Check</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis Procedures

According to Creswell (2007), getting individuals to share their stories or life experiences by means of recording their stories or journaling is typical protocol for narrative research. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that, when conducting narrative research, there is no specific protocol for constructing the stories; rather, they are a collection of individual stories and their artifacts that develop into the retelling of their stories and experiences. For this study, interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Therefore, the main source of data used for analysis was the transcripts from the interviews. An important part of the process of analyzing the participants’ stories was the cross referencing of the transcripts with the individual participants to assist in validating their stories accurately and finding appropriate themes and meanings within the stories. Researcher was able to receive school transcripts from three of the six participants.

There was a two-phased analysis for this study. First, each of the individual stories was written based on the interview transcripts, artifacts and/or documents, and information from support agents, for three of the six participants. The narratives were
written in chronological order to remain true to the participant’s journey through the educational and foster care system.

The timelines of events in their personal narratives were also verified with each participant several times in order to provide accuracy to their shared experiences and reflections (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); care was taken to ensure the stories told were those of the participants and not interpreted through the researcher’s perspective. There were times during the member checks with the participants that the chronological events were adjusted due to reports of numerous foster placements being listed out of sequence. The researcher used Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) method of “three dimensional narrative inquiry space” (p. 49,) that “allows our inquiries to travel— inward, outward, backward, forward, and situated within place” (p. 49).

This study allowed the participants and the researcher to explore inward to identify and examine the experiences within the systems. The researcher used field notes to look outwardly toward participants’ shared experiences and reflections, backward to reflect on those past experiences, and forward toward the transformations of best practices for youth in the foster care system. As participants shared information about their various placements, there were often blurred lines when discussing their years in foster care, which often ran together for the participants; this process became overwhelming for the researcher, who gave these responses a personal examination to help her move toward implementing best practices to better serve students in foster care.

The three-dimensional narrative inquiry space allowed analysis and interpretation in the form of the three dimensions: time, the personal/social interactions, and place (Clandinin, 2006). Once the stories were constructed, the participants were given copies
of the stories to verify for accuracy and to make sure that the stories that emerged from this process were those of the participants and not the researcher’s interpretation.

After the participants validated their stories, the stories were coded to look for patterns and/or themes, using cycles of repeated review, evaluation with the participants, and re-examination of the data collected from interviews and document and artifacts (Creswell, 2000). The researcher used grounded theory coding that involved open, axial, and selective coding, that allowed the development of the collective stories, which became the central themes of the study: Impact of Instability and Permanency within Placements and Schools, Lack of Trust and Reliability within Systems, Perceptions and Expectations (Foster Youth, Foster Families, Systems, and Communities), Collaboration and Accountability within Systems and Policies, and Self-Reflection on Survival as a Student in Foster Care (Attachment or Resilience).

First open coding was conducted through line-by-line coding, which included reading each of the stories and then either highlight/underlining specific words and phrases and writing the codes in the margin (see figure two). The stories were coded for things like abuse, neglect, abandonment, instability, etc. As these themes emerged, coding was used to organize the data and assist with identifying common themes and categories. After the open coding process, the stories and their codes were examined for relationships between the patterns using axial coding. Examples of relationships that emerged include permanency and trust or the opposite—instability and lack of trust as well as how permanency and instability were demonstrated in relationship to school success.
When she was four years old, Rose and her five-year-old sister were adopted by their foster family and remained in this blended family until she reached the age of 16. However, there were issues with the older brother in her adopted home, as he physically abused her for many years. At the age of 16, Rose ran away from home to a friend’s house, but returned home at the request of her adoptive mother to assist with the care of her adoptive father, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Upon returning to her home, Rose was greeted by a child welfare agency social worker and her adoptive mother. Rose explained that she had been physically abused by older brother for years and no longer wanted to live in the same home as him. The social worker gave Rose the option of returning to foster care or remaining in the care of her adoptive family, but Rose states that she felt it was more of a tactic to scare her to not run away anymore and deal with the family dynamics. Rose told the social worker that she was better off in foster care due to her brother’s violent rages because she felt he would physically harm her further or even one day kill her as a result of his violent acts.

Figure 2. Line-by-line coding of an excerpt of Rose’s story

Lastly, selective coding was used to illustrate the central themes that emerged across all data, which were the basis for the different “collective stories”. Each theme then became categorized and developed into one of the collective stories of experiences from the various participants’ interviews. The collective stories are told through the voices of the participants.

Validity and Reliability

The concept of validity within a narrative study is related to the credibility and trustworthiness of a statement or knowledge to be shared in stories and life experiences. “Validity is not inherent in a claim but is a characteristic given to a claim by the ones to whom the claim is addressed” (Polkinghorne, 2007). Validity for this study was based on
multiple data sources (interviews and document analysis) and member checks where the participants reviewed transcripts of each of the interviews and the individual stories that were developed from the transcripts across interviews. In addition, the Adult Attachment Scale (Collins & Read, 1990) and the Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (Connor & Davidson, 2003), which were used to develop the interview questions, have both been validated through extensive research. Reliability was demonstrated by explicit description of the research methodology, use of standardized interview protocols, and the same analysis procedures for all data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Researcher Positionality**

As a researcher, I took the position of an unbiased observer without affiliation or direct ties to participants, educational, or social service agencies that were discussed in the study. I am not currently, nor have been, a social worker or school counselor for the participants in this study. However, I do have experience with the social service system as a foster care social worker for the past five years in Los Angeles County, and I have eight years of experience in working with at-risk youth in the public educational system as an At Risk Dropout Intervention Counselor at the secondary school level, also in Los Angeles County. These experiences have not involved the study participants in a prior manner that would deter or interfere with their sharing their life experiences for this study. However, it did assist me to have these particular professional experiences as well as some foundational knowledge of policies, educational guidelines, and experience as a support agent for foster youth during their educational journeys. These experiences further helped me to establish rapport with the participants, at the same time allowing me to understand specific boundaries.
As a social worker and counselor who has worked with at-risk students and youth in foster care within both the educational and social service systems, I understand the challenges and obstacles they face from both outsider and insider perspectives. Both of my career positions allowed me to be a youth advocate for this specific population and learn to understand the tools necessary to assist in navigating through both complex systems for the better of their youth. Being knowledgeable about both of the major support roles, school counselor and social worker, allowed me to understand the various roles within each system. From both roles, I gained firsthand knowledge about which services tend to be the most difficult to fulfill and which are prioritized by the systems as either imperative or not. Having served in such positions, I was aware that I might have biases for or against either or both systems, and had to consciously reflect about how that might affect interviews, the development of interview questions, interpretations, data collection, and analysis. However, since I have never been in the foster care or educational system within Los Angeles County, I made every effort to maintain the role of informed outsider as I conducted this study.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are several limitations in this study. While qualitative studies often consider number of interviews conducted or number of documents examined in addition to the number of participants (Sandelowski, 1995), it is important to acknowledge that the sample size was a limitation for the study. This narrative inquiry included interviews and other data from a small sample size of six adult former foster youth, which must be seen as a limited sample and not generalizable to the larger population of all foster youth.
However, naturalistic generalizations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) may be made about others who shared similar experiences with the participants.

A second limitation was the fact that the participants were older than eighteen and exited from the foster care system, so the experiences they shared may have been about situations that took place years ago and may not be related to current policies and practices due to policy changes or systems’ revamping their services. According to Bochner (2007) “in the gathering and telling of ‘stories’, we are gathering "knowledge from the past and not necessarily knowledge about the past” (Bochner, 2007, p. 203). Since interviews were the primary data sources, there were limited opportunities for triangulation and/or access to multiple data sources to provide better-rounded perspectives of foster youth while in the child welfare agency and educational systems; rather, the narratives were derived from one particular perspective, that of the participants, who also provided access to other data and/or informants. Other considerations are that the participants’ memories may have faded, the experiences were self-reported, and the participants might have a personal agenda for sharing their experiences for this study, either positive or negative. Since all interview responses were self-reported, participants may not have told the researcher about events or actions that could have reflected negatively on them.

The length of the study was of a short duration, and the researcher conducted only three interviews with each participant. Therefore it is unclear whether data saturation was achieved (Mason, 2010), although analysis ended when the central themes/collective stories emerged from the data. The researcher is also a mandated reporter, which each participant was made aware of and which may have limited the amount of information
provided during the study, since the participant/s may not want to share alleged abuse or reportable information.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodology used to explore six adults’ personal reflections and life experiences as former foster youth within the child welfare agency and educational systems in Los Angeles County. This study used a qualitative approach and narrative methods for retrieving data through interviews and artifact/documentation collection (Creswell, 1998). Prior to selecting the methodology, the researcher evaluated the most appropriate data collection methods and tools to elicit quality responses to the research questions and found that narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) would provide the most insight into the actual life experiences of participants to provide insight regarding what assists or hinders them from completing their secondary education.

Allowing participants to provide artifacts and documents, as well as provide supportive agents they identified as important to their life experiences, was empowering and informative, which helped uncover answers from the data collected. The following chapter describes the central themes/collective stories of the participants.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

There are thousands of youth identified by the child welfare agency in the Los Angeles County as residing in unsafe or potentially unsafe homes due to abuse or neglect (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Casey et al., 2003; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; McKlindon et al., 2011). These children are removed from their homes and placed in the foster care system, with the goal of finding a safe and permanent home. This goal can include future reunification with their family after they meet requirements set forth by courts and the child welfare agency, permanent placement with a legal guardian, and/or adoption. While the goal seems concrete and ideal, the state holds responsibility not only for the youth’s wellbeing and safety, but should also be accountable for their educational attainment while in its care. Youth in foster care learn in the school settings in addition to their foster care placements. Success or failure in the educational system can influence their economic, social and personal development, and goals and accomplishments over the course of their lives.

The goal of this narrative study was to listen to and tell the stories of adult former foster youth who went through the child welfare agency and public educational systems in Los Angeles County. This inquiry elicited the stories of their first-hand experiences and brings to light their voices about those experiences to inform educators and other professionals. The six participants not only opened up and shared the personal stories of abuse and neglect, but also their journeys through the foster care system and how they tried to thrive in public school while in placement and away from their biological families. Chapter four is organized as follows: the first section includes a summary of
each participant’s personal story, beginning with their initial placement and some of their significant experiences while in foster care and the public school systems of Los Angeles County. The narratives were collected through interviews, the examination of documents, field notes and memos that were used in the collection and creation of their narrative stories. In addition, the stories were validated with the participants and, at times, through informal interviews with former support providers who served as informants. The next section highlights and describes the central themes that emerged from analyzing the participants’ complete stories. The stories they told and the themes that emerged from their personal experiences provide details that exemplify the voices of the participants.

The Stories of Six Adult Former Foster Care Youth

Chapter three introduced the six participants of this study: Rose, Marquis, Melissa, Monique, Sparkle, and Maria (all pseudonyms). All six participants were in foster care placements and attended public schools in Los Angeles County until they turned 18, their stories, are told here. While there are a variety of reasons that children are removed from the home by the child welfare system, this study tells the stories of participants who were removed from their homes as a result of neglect or abuse.

Rose

Rose is an 18-year-old female of Mexican American descent and has been in and out of foster care since she was two months old. Her mother, an alcoholic and drug abuser, had all of her twelve children removed from her custody by the child welfare agency on different occasions. When Rose was two months old, she and her one-year old sister were removed from the care of her biological mother as a result of neglect and were
placed in foster care by the local child welfare agency. Rose and her sister stayed in the same stable foster placement for four years before their foster parents adopted them. Rose discussed becoming aware that she was adopted and that her adoption was never a hidden family secret. Her adoptive family had a total of eight children; Rose and two others were adopted.

As a child, Rose did not remember meeting her biological mother or father or her other siblings, with the exception of the sister with whom she was placed in foster care when she was two months old. However, in 2012, Rose did find three of her half-sisters and has contact with them currently. Her half siblings were the ones who informed her that her biological mother passed away in 2007 from drug abuse. Rose also discussed the fact that her eleven siblings do not share the same biological father, and they do not know who her father is or where he is located. The child welfare agency was never able to locate Rose’s father.

When she was four years old, Rose and her five-year-old sister were adopted by their foster family and remained in this blended family until she reached the age of 16. However, there were issues with the older brother in her adopted home, as he physically abused her for many years. At the age of 16, Rose ran away from home to a friend’s house, but returned home at the request of her adoptive mother to assist with the care of her adoptive father, who suffered from Alzheimer’s disease. Upon returning to her home, Rose was greeted by a child welfare agency social worker and her adoptive mother. Rose explained that she had been physically abused by her older brother for years and no longer wanted to live in the same home as him. The social worker gave Rose the option of returning to foster care or remaining in the care of her adoptive family, but Rose states
that she felt it was more of a tactic to scare her to not run away anymore and deal with the family dynamics. Rose told the social worker that she was better off in foster care due to her brother’s violent rages because she felt he would physically harm her further or even one day kill her as a result of his violent acts.

Rose had four other foster care placements before she turned 18. Rose considered these placements more as shelters than families with whom she might become attached. The foster homes were merely places for her to receive the minimum care to function daily, so she could attend school and work. Rose had goals to achieve, and being a youth in the foster care system would not disrupt her path to success. While in foster care, Rose’s high school counselor gave her the option to graduate with fewer credits through AB 167, but she refused to allow others to treat her differently because she was identified as a foster youth. She disliked being labeled as a foster youth and felt that she did not want or need the school system to make an exception for her educational attainment.

After turning 18, Rose continued to get support from her social worker and received AB12 assistance to live in transitional housing in the San Gabriel Valley.

**Marquis**

Marquis is a 23-year-old African American male who has been in and out of foster care since he was four years old. He and his two older sisters were removed from the care of his biological parents after they were found home alone. The child welfare agency and courts determined that his parents neglected Marquis and his sisters as a result of their drug use. They also found that domestic violence between the parents contributed to this neglect. Marquis, and his two sisters, who were 12 and 13 years old, were placed into a group home by the local child welfare agency. A group home is not a
typical setting for such young first time placements, but this was the best option available, according to this system, because it allowed the agency to keep the siblings together. It was at this first placement that Marquis went mute as a result of his fear of speaking to adults and others because he worried that they might separate him from his sisters. Marquis only spoke to his sisters, and only in a whisper. Marquis remained mute for more than a year, which made professionals worry that he was developmentally delayed. Marquis was the youngest child in this group home, and, although he preferred to sleep with his sisters, it was against group home rules for boys and girls to sleep together. Marquis felt alone and different from his peers in the group home and at school. He had to share his sleeping quarters with teenage boys who were placed at this group home for behavioral issues. He looked up to these older male teens and learned from their “class-clown” behavior at the group home and also in the school setting, which led him to demonstrate troublesome behavior in order to fit in with his peers.

Marquis moved ten more times while attempting to complete his education; some moves involved family kin-care, which entails being cared for by approved family members. In Marquis’ case, this included his maternal aunt and his sisters when they reached adulthood, but also involved other foster homes and group homes. Both of his parents lost their parental rights by the time Marquis was 10 years old. Marquis’ maternal aunt became his legal guardian when he was 12 years old, after he had been living with her and his older sisters for six years. However, at 15, Marquis continued to feel alone and different, which led him to be defiant and noncompliant with his aunt’s house rules. Marquis ran away from home, was homeless for over a year, and dropped out of school. At this time, his older sisters gave him the motivation and support to
return to the foster care system so he could find a stable placement and attempt to finish high school. Marquis attended another six different schools before getting an exemption to receive his high school diploma through AB 167, which allowed him to meet fewer requirements to graduate at the age of 19. By that time, he was living in an all-male group facility.

Marquis describes his ongoing battle with pushing people away and not wanting to get close to anyone. He verbalized that the reason for this battle is that, if he does not allow others to depend on him emotionally, he cannot hurt them and they cannot hurt him. Marquis has a two-year old son; he makes efforts to be an active parent and love his son and also to allow his son to love him. Marquis’ inability to allow himself to attach to others ended his relationship with his son’s mother. Marquis wonders whether it would have been a better situation if he had stayed with his biological parents, rather than living in a series of different placements, which caused him to develop his current state of solitude. Marquis recently found contentment with the support of transitional housing in Northwest Los Angeles through AB 12 so that his son can visit with him.

**Melissa**

Melissa is a 24-year-old female of African American and Caucasian descent who has been in and out of foster care since she was three years old. Her biological mother was addicted to cocaine and her biological father was incarcerated when she was taken by the child welfare system because a neighbor reported that she and her siblings were being neglected. At that time, Melissa and her five siblings were placed into foster homes, but only Melissa and her younger sister, two-years-old at the time, were placed together. Both Melissa and her younger sister share the same biological father; her older four
siblings had a different biological father and were eventually placed with their paternal family.

Melissa and her younger sister remained in the child welfare system until they each turned 18 years old and were emancipated. Melissa had ten different placements in 15 years; two of those placements were extremely short (one three-month stay at juvenile hall and another two-month stay at a homeless shelter) due to the lack of available foster homes in which to place her. Melissa describes juvenile hall as one of her better placements because she was treated like she mattered, and she felt safe.

Melissa and her younger sibling found stability, love, and comfort with their first placement, which lasted two years. However, because the elderly foster parents’ did not want to adopt the girls, this caused their social worker to uproot them and place them with a potential adoptive family 60 miles away. Melissa states that at least the social worker advocated for the girls to remain in the same schools until the end of the school year, as it was important for them to have some stability since they were being uprooted from their foster home. However, the social service system and the court failed them by allowing their adoptive family to cut all ties with the foster family, whom they considered to be their grandparents. This forced them to cut all attachments to the only family they had known, which caused major issues with the adoptive family. Ultimately, the adoption did not go through because the adoptive parents saw the girls as unwilling to join their family and leave their past behind. After three months, the adoptive family asked Melissa’s social worker to pick the two of them up and change their placement, without informing either of them. Melissa had no idea that they would be leaving when
her social worker showed up at her adoptive family’s home for what she thought was a regular monthly visit.

Melissa and her sister were unable to return to their prior foster family, the couple they thought of as grandparents, because they no longer had space for the two of them. She and her sister were placed with a new foster family where they remained from the time Melissa was seven until she was 16. In this placement, she was sexually, physically, and emotionally abused by the foster parent’s biological older son, who was in his 30s. This abuse went on for four years without anyone noticing her cries for help, and Melissa became deeply depressed. She went from being an honor student before the abuse started to failing all of her classes and having major attendance issues due to depression, which left her in bed for days and weeks at a time. Melissa remembers bitterly that not one school staff member came to her house to check on her, and even her social worker of many years did not recognize her change in demeanor as a plea for help. When she was 16 years old Melissa spoke to her foster mother about the abuse; that led only to the foster mother scolding and threatening her son to stop the abuse, but not to any change in his behavior. Melissa says the abuse continued for a couple of years, but then she reached a point where the abuse and depression was far too hard to deal with alone. Her prior motivation for keeping the secret of her abuse was only to remain in the same foster home and same school as her sister, but it came at a great cost her emotional and well being. Rather than continuing to hide the fact that she was still being abused, Melissa called an old family friend and told her what had been going on and, within a few hours, the family friend came to get her and her sister and contacted child welfare agency services.
Melissa had seven additional placements after this incident. Due to the instability of her placements, Melissa was advised that a General Education Development (GED) program would be best to meet her educational needs. Melissa agreed to enter the GED program but regrets that decision. Melissa sees herself as more than a GED graduate and feels that she let herself down by accepting anything less than a regular high school diploma. Melissa was one class short of receiving her high school diploma at the time she took the GED test, which she passed without any prior studying.

Melissa had the same county social worker (CSW) throughout her time as a minor in foster care, which is not typical for a minor who has been in the system for as long as she was, especially one who was moved around to different placements so many times. Melissa identifies her CSW as one of the main support providers who allowed her to fall through the cracks and become a typical foster care statistic in terms of not graduating from high school and bouncing around to numerous placements. Melissa is currently living in her own apartment in the Los Angeles area and works at a transitional housing program for foster youth.

**Monique**

Monique is a 19-year old African American female who has been in and out of foster care since she was three years old. Her mother, a drug addict who neglected her, had her three daughters removed from her care because of poor living conditions in South Los Angeles. Monique, three years old at the time she was removed, was placed in foster care along with her older sisters, who were four and ten years old. Monique and her siblings were placed in a foster home briefly before their maternal grandmother was approved to care for the girls. Her grandmother took care of the girls for less than a year.
before passing away from a heart attack. Monique and her sisters moved in with their maternal aunt and remained in South Los Angeles. Eventually, they were taken from the care of this aunt due to her criminal behavior. At this time, they were separated; one sister, who has a different biological father, was placed with a paternal family member, and the other sister ran away because she did not want to be placed in foster care.

Monique estimates she had more than 20 placements since being placed in the foster care system. She describes her first placement, after being removed from her aunt’s care when she was six years old, as a nice home with a nice foster mother. This placement lasted three months but abruptly ended when her foster mother dropped her off at a group home with no explanation, and Monique did not understand what went wrong. Monique only remained at this teenage group home for a short time while an appropriate placement was being found for her. She was soon moved to another group home in northeast Los Angeles and remained there until she was 16 years old. At the time, Monique hated this new group home and longed for a foster family, but she now reflects on her past experiences and sees that the home provided her with a structure that she did not have prior to living there.

When she was 16 years old, Monique requested to be placed in a foster home but that placement lasted less than a month because she had trouble adjusting to a foster home placement, which is different from a group home. Monique ran away after feeling unwanted, which lead to a warrant for her arrest when she was reported as a runaway by her county social worker. Rather than another foster home, Monique continued to be placed into various group homes in the Los Angeles area due to her noncompliant behavior. She describes her behavior as a mechanism that she used so as not to allow
others to bully her or make her feel less than her worth. The focus she held strong to was completing her education and graduating from high school. She often ran away on the weekend but made sure to return in time to go to school on Monday morning.

Monique’s placements included two visits to juvenile hall, numerous group homes, and shelters. When we tried to map out her placements, it became a whirlwind of confusion to discuss the lengths and order of her placements. Monique does not feel that her downfall was the numerous placements, but rather medication that was forced on her after she was diagnosed with mental health issues. That medication, Monique recalls, was like a dark cloud that caused her to become obese and feel numb for many years. However, that changed during her two month stay in juvenile hall, when Monique went from taking 15 to 20 pills a day since her diagnosis at age 17 to taking no medication while incarcerated. Monique continues to be medication-free two years later and maintains that she lives a healthier life and has a clear mind to make sound decisions on her own.

Despite the many obstacles from the numerous placements and mental fogginess due to medication, Monique graduated from a local public high school while in her last foster care placement. She proudly talks about how she completed all the graduation requirements, with support from an Individualized Education Program throughout her secondary years. At 18 years of age, Monique received transitional housing services and is currently living in the northeast part of Los Angeles. She works full-time as a security staff member and goes to the local community college full-time.
Sparkle

Sparkle is an 18-year old Caucasian transgender who identifies herself as female. She has been in and out of foster care since she was 12 years old. Her mother passed away when she was seven years old, leaving Sparkle and her father to run the household. Her father, an alcoholic, became verbally and physically abusive towards her whenever he was drunk. Sparkle’s foster care experience began in northern California, in a small town in San Luis Obispo County. From the ages of 12 to 16, Sparkle was in and out of foster care placements, at times reuniting with her father only to be taken away when he emotionally abused her, especially when she began the process of transitioning to a woman. This topic was the cause of Sparkle’s biggest disputes with her father. From the time she entered foster care, Sparkle’s social workers worked to find loving and nurturing placements for her, and required that she have her own room because she was a transgender woman. Sparkle wanted her foster homes to be open and respectful of her personal rights, but this was not the case for the majority of her placements in northern California and Los Angeles County.

Sparkle had more than seven foster care and emergency shelter placements before being reunited with her father and forced to move to Texas with him. In Texas, she felt less supported as a transgender woman in her school and community. She also struggled with depression. In school, she was placed in a small classroom setting due to her battle with depression. After nine months of continued discussion with her father and peers, Sparkle took a trip to visit her paternal grandmother in Las Vegas. For the return trip, her father sent her a bus ticket to Texas that had a stop in downtown Los Angeles. Sparkle, now 16-years-old, got off the bus in Los Angeles and decided to stay in downtown. At
the station, who was homeless and living on Skid Row. The girl and her mother helped Sparkle find a homeless shelter that connected her with child welfare system. After finding out about the ongoing abuse cases filed against her father, the child welfare agency allowed Sparkle to stay in Los Angeles County and placed her in an appropriate setting. The agency also connected her with a variety of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) supports and services.

While under the protection of child welfare services in Los Angeles County, Sparkle had six foster care placements and also stayed in emergency shelters until she turned 18 and was placed in transitional housing. Sparkle felt most at home and supported while in a shelter for six months in Hollywood, where the LGBT community was strong and supportive. It was in this shelter that Sparkle began to feel loved and accepted by others. She joined a local support and advocacy group for LGBT youth and enrolled in a GED program. Sparkle is currently living in the northeast Los Angeles area in transitional housing under AB12.

Maria

Maria is an 18-year-old female Mexican immigrant who came to this country illegally as a child with her mother and three brothers. When she was 13 years old, her mother was arrested and deported to Mexico. For two years, Maria and her brothers lived with a family friend, and then lived with relatives for a while. While living with relatives, Maria and her youngest brother were separated so there would be less of a financial burden on the relatives. When she was 15 years old, Maria ran away to a friend’s house because she was tired of being treated as less than important by her relatives. Maria was happy and felt loved when she was living with her friend and her
friend’s family. However, Maria made a bad decision to skip school one day and was caught being truant by local police officers. After the police questioned Maria about her residence and parents’ whereabouts, she was taken into custody because, technically, she had no legal guardian and her mother was living out of the country. She and her brother were placed in the child welfare system that same evening. She blames herself because she is the one who chose to skip school that day.

Maria was separated from her brother and placed in a foster home in the Long Beach area with a very caring foster mother. Maria describes the woman as loving and supportive, and describes how she pushed for her foster kids to understand the importance of completing high school. She remained in that home for six months and then was abruptly moved to the San Gabriel Valley to be placed in a foster home with her younger brother. Maria describes coming home from school in Long Beach to find that her things were packed and being told that she had to be moved at that exact moment. She was given no reason for the change in placement, no goodbyes to school friends, and no closure with a caring foster mother. In her new foster home, she made an important connection with a school staff member who assisted her during her last two years of high school and helped her to graduate on time. At the time of this study, Maria was four months pregnant and living in the San Gabriel Valley area in transitional housing under AB12. She will stay there until she gives birth and then she will have to move out due to AB12 regulations.

**Negative Consequences**

The participants in this study experienced many of the negative consequences (see table seven) reported in the literature (Tyler & Melander, 2010). These negative
consequences were embedded throughout the stories of the participants and also impacted the development of the central themes that emerged from data analysis. The consequences that were reported aligned with the literature that discusses poor life outcomes for foster youth (Frerer et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2008) and highlight the challenges experienced by the participants of this study.

Table 7

*Negative Consequences of Foster Care for Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Rose</th>
<th>Marquis</th>
<th>Melissa</th>
<th>Monique</th>
<th>Sparkle</th>
<th>Maria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Homeless at Some Point</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No High School Completion</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had Child While In Foster Care</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarcerated</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Through Their Voices We Can Learn*

The voices of the participants came through strongly in each of the stories told in the previous section. These stories, which were based primarily on the interview data and supplemented with documents and interviews with informants, were coded and analyzed for themes that were evident across all stories. Five central themes emerged from the analysis of the stories: (1) Impact of Instability and Permanency within Placements and Schools; (2) Lack of Trust and Reliability within Systems; (3) Perceptions and Expectations (Foster Youth, Foster Families, Systems, and Communities); (4) Collaboration and Accountability within Systems and Policies; and (5) Self-Reflection on Survival as a Student in Foster Care (Attachment or Resilience). Table eight gives a brief
overview of each of the themes, which are then fully described as collective stories highlighting the voices of the participants.

Table 8

**Central Themes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impact of Instability and Permanency within Placements and Schools</td>
<td>The toll that multiple foster care placements and changes in school settings physically and/or emotionally has on a student in foster care with or without any other stability in other areas of their lives.</td>
<td>Monique had so many changes in placements, which also led to multiple changes in schools, that she no longer allowed herself to become dependent on others, as they would be gone soon enough. Therefore she was only able to depend of herself and her own self-encouragement to complete school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Trust and Reliability within Systems</td>
<td>The inconsistencies in the child welfare agencies, school system, and foster placements make it difficult for participants to trust and rely on educators and other professionals.</td>
<td>Rose and Maria shared experiences in foster care placement when they were told on the spot that they were changing placements and schools without any notice. These types of situations made it hard to trust and rely on the systems that could change their worlds without a moment’s notice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions and Expectations</td>
<td>The labels students in foster care deal with within the systems that serve them, and the expectations they are held to.</td>
<td>Sparkle shared that when teachers would find out she was a foster youth, they would assume she did something bad versus being a victim to abuse or neglect.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration and Accountability within Systems and Policies</td>
<td>Foster youth have multiple systems, e.g., school, child welfare system, legal, etc. to assist the in their daily lives, yet the systems tend not to work together or be held accountable for their vital roles in the foster youth’s life.</td>
<td>Marquis stated he always got his bus pass late every month from his social worker but he needed the pass to get to school every day. Not wanting to miss school, he would take the train without paying and by doing so received multiple citations that lead eventually to a warrant for his arrest. Even after complaining multiple times to the social worker’s supervisor, nothing changed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Reflection on Survival as a Student in Foster Care (Attachment or Resilience)</td>
<td>This theme looks at the students’ journeys through foster care system while looking at how relationships and their ability to overcome adversity impacted their schooling.</td>
<td>Maria and Melissa shared the positive impact their mentor relationships had on their lives as students and foster youth. On the other hand, Rose and Monique indicated that they needed little guidance or support to maneuver through the systems.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Impact of Instability and Permanency within Placements and Schools

The participants all shared how instability and lack of permanency in placements and schools affected their high school completion. It is important to note that foster care placement instability, which results from changing from one placement to another, often directly affects the youth’s school placement as well. Changes in placements can be due to a variety of reasons like the foster parent’s no longer being able to care for youth due to issues relating from the placement, the loss of the foster parent’s license, or the foster parents’ no longer wanting to have youth in their home. The changes can also happen because the foster youth decide they no longer want to live in the particular placement when they do not feel comfortable there, when they do not get along with others there, or, sometimes, when they do not want to live in a certain area. These and many other reasons can cause a request to change placement within a certain timeframe or, at times, cause immediate change in placement without proper notice, as some participants discussed. Students in foster care are four times more likely to change schools at least one time during a school year, as compared to their non-foster youth peers, due to instability in placements (Barrat & Berliner, 2013).

Unrau et al. (2008) discussed placement instability within the foster care system, which has been identified as one of the major risk factors that can contribute to negative outcomes for foster youth as adults. Placement instability can be based on number of placements a foster youth may have within a certain time frame or within their entire time in care of the child welfare agency system. That instability in placement and the lack of permanency for foster youth have been linked to increased poor behavior and poor academic achievement (Unrau et al.). For this narrative study, the six participants shared
their number of placements while in child welfare system as well as how many schools they attended in connection to change in placements (Table 9).

Table 9

Number of Foster Care Placements for Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Foster Homes</th>
<th>Group Homes</th>
<th>Other Placements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marquis</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sparkle</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants indicated that they had had multiple placements, ranging up to 20 or more placements during a 15-year period: thirteen placements for Monique while she was in high school and five within a two-year period but relative stability other than that for Rose. These changes in placements often included a change in school. Monique had so many placements that it was difficult to map out the changes. In addition to home placement changes, Monique also changed school sites eight different times during her high school years and had an IEP that did not always make it to her new school in a timely manner.

The six participants all discussed how they were affected by the changes in placements and/or schools, sharing their experiences, reflections, and emotions when placements were changed. For example, Rose, a high school graduate with 18 years in the child welfare system describes a time when her placement was abruptly changed:

Rose: I got in a fight with a girl in the foster home…but she came in my room starting drama. She was a bully, but close to the foster mom because she had been in the house the longest.
My foster mom never told her anything. A week later, the foster mom tells me she is going camping with her family and that they would need to send all the foster kids to respite care while they are gone. I thought I was going for a week…then, when my social worker came to pick me up, she seen I only had one bag of clothes. She said ‘No. Pack everything.’ Then, I realized I was going to leave the same day to somewhere new but forever. It was kind of surprising and hurtful. I thought ‘Damn. I’m going to another foster house. Another new school I have to go to? This is my third house.’ I started to feel like it might just be me that was so messed up that I couldn’t stay in one foster home.

Marquis, who had 19 years in the foster care system and did not complete high school, also talked about how disruptive the changes in placements were, especially the fact that he had no control over changes even when he had a successful school experience.

**Marquis** I finally found a school I really liked in Pasadena. Then, I got moved to Long Beach. At this point, I’m like, man, I don’t want to start all over again. So, I would take the train from Long Beach to Pasadena every day. A lot of times, my social worker would be late giving me tokens for school, so I’d take the train and not pay. In fact, I got like 30 train tickets when I was 17 years old…then, about four months ago, I went to the
police station to help my brother with clearing his record, and they pull my name up, too. They put me in handcuffs for having a warrant. A warrant from those tickets, which I got trying to get to school. It’s ridiculous, and I had to go to jail for over a week to clear them since I didn’t have money to pay the warrants. That is the only time I’ve ever been in jail…for tickets for taking a train to get to school. My social worker should have been on top of it. Looking back, it was worth it though because I got to stay in one school…like switching schools, after getting use to one, that’s messed up. Your life feels fake. Everything has a sense of, like artificialness. It’s hard to take something serious that you feel is fake because it’s only temporary.

Melissa, who was in the foster care system for 16 years and did not graduate high school, and Monique, a high school graduate with 15 years in foster care, both talked about the toll instability took on them, complaining about not knowing where or why they would be moved into a different placement:

**Melissa:** I’d think this is not cool. This is crazy that I have no stability. Being so unstable definitely affected me more as an older foster youth than a child. I had dreams for my future, but how can I plan, when I don’t know where I will be tomorrow? Especially as a teen in foster care, the foster parents don’t want to deal with teen problems.
**Monique:** I was six years old when I was placed in foster care home. Prior to that, child services had me living with my aunt, after we were taken from my mom at three years old due to drugs. I remember my first foster mom…she was so nice. Her name was Ann Mckay. My older sister and I were only with her for 4-5 months…I don’t know what happened. She dropped me off one day, and I didn’t understand what was going on. I didn’t know she wasn’t coming back for me for months. I was so sad and felt so bad. After that, I only wanted to stay in group homes.

Interestingly, those who did not complete high school seemed to focus more on describing instability in school, while those who graduated were more likely to discuss instability at home and describe stabilizing factors at school. Sparkle, who did not graduate high school and was in the foster care system for six years, and Maria who did graduate high school and was in the foster care system for three years, shared their thoughts on the subject:

**Sparkle:** I moved from northern California to Texas, to Vegas, to Los Angeles, all within my high school years. School became my last priority because I couldn’t ever catch up or get adjusted to each school setting before moving again. I didn’t get to stay anywhere consistent. I didn’t know any of the material, but it wasn’t because I didn’t want to learn, but I moved around too much.
Maria: After my mom was deported back to Mexico, I felt so unstable; moving from family to friend’s houses…then I get placed in foster care thinking the moving would stop. They moved to this nice foster mother’s house, but, one day, I come home from school and they say I got to move that same day. I felt like why am I trying to do better in school and graduate when I have no control of what happens to me. I missed my mom and brothers so much…I didn’t want to have to start over again. But, luckily for me, I met Mr. Vasquez at my new school, and he helped me focus on school and not my issues outside of that.

When discussing the challenges with the instability of placements and, therefore, school sites, the notion of permanency as a counter to instability emerged for the participants. The goal for the foster care system is to provide all foster youth with permanency to support the transition to adulthood and after exiting the system. In comparison to typical teen that might receive this type of transition from their family members. However, these options are less likely for youth in foster care; therefore, their social workers tend to help them pursue either physical or relational permanency.

Physical permanency is having a home or a place to live after exiting foster care; relational permanency is having a relationship or connection with a caring adult such as a biological parent, extended family, teachers, neighbors, or former foster parents (Mallon, 2011). Having permanent persons in a foster youth’s life can provide the lifelong support that any youth needs when transitioning into adulthood. The participants of this study
shared their experiences with the lack of permanency in their lives and the direct impact it had on their emotional states, educational attainment, and developing goals for the future throughout their personal development. Marquis talked about the effects that not having a permanent home as a youth have on some of the choices he makes today:

**Marquis:** You know, I’m 23 years old, and I still don’t have a home. There is no peace inside me. I feel like that’s what a home brings…peace…ease…but I haven’t felt like I have had a home since I was 4 years old. That’s when I first came into foster care. People think it’s weird that I don’t like to put things up on the wall in my apartment. I lived here for over a year. There is something that inside that reminds me this is not permanent and can be taken, so you got to be ready to be on the move in a quick minute…What I do, almost as a ritual at every new placement is I arrange my bedroom the same way everywhere I go. It’s like a mobile home and that brings me comfort because no matter where I go, that is the same. I can have peace and sleep easier. Same bed against same side of the wall in the room. Same night stand, next to the bed at a certain angle. Same set up inside my closet for my clothes and shoes. My mobile home…can go with me anywhere. Crazy, huh?
Melissa recalled a time when she thought she had achieved home stability, only to have it taken away from her with no explanation. Monique, Sparkle, and Maria also discussed the lack of permanence in their relationships:

**Melissa**  I remember when they placed us with a family that was going to adopt us, we moved from Carson to Chino, but the social worker advocated for us to finish the semester at our elementary school in Carson to keep some kind of stability. But, after the school year was over, our adoptive parents stopped us from communicating at all with old foster parents, siblings, or friends from over there. I didn’t like that at all because my prior foster parents had become family to me. I called them granny and grand-dad. When that was taken away from me, it’s like we lost our parents all over again. They were trying to force themselves on us, well, ripping away anything we knew for selfish reasons on their part. After that, I didn’t want to have any adopt me, and I’d rather move.

**Monique:**  I had no permanent people ever really in my life. Gosh I’ve had [counting on fingers] one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, 10…umm, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19. I think that’s it, and that includes juvenile hall…two times in juvenile hall, actually…I think only two times.

**Sparkle:**  There was never a permanent arrangement for me to live. It was a lot being a transgender youth in foster care and at
school. My own dad couldn’t accept me as a female, and neither did the foster parents that my social worker would place me at. Everything was temporary no matter how I tried to make it long-term. Believe me, I tried to, but I wouldn’t stop being who I was, which bothered others when it shouldn’t. My teachers wouldn’t even call me my female name after I’d request them to. Why respect them when they clearly have no respect for me?

Maria: I never felt like I had a home without my mom being here…you know. I have a boyfriend now, and we are having a baby…I planned on having a baby now, so we can get all the help we can get. His family love me, and are excited about the baby…I plan to move in with them before the baby is born. Then, I can give them money from AB12 to live with them. It’s important to have a home for the baby.

Lack of Trust and Reliability within Systems

Frequent foster care placements and school site changes can cause a student in the foster care system to have difficulties keeping up with course work, the loss of credits towards graduation, and the lack of motivation to keep starting over again. The next theme that emerged from instability and lack of permanency in the participants’ lives, which is the lack of trust and reliability. Not having dependable relationships and healthy connections with others while at school or in home placements can have lasting consequences (Unrau et al, 2008). Those consequences may continue to be present in
foster youths’ lives as young adults. The participants shared experiences and reflections that questioned their different relationships, behaviors, and their experiences living with and without trust. Rose, Marquis, and Melissa all discussed the issues they have with trusting others, even those with whom they have close relationships.

Rose: You can’t trust anyone in the foster home because they will take your personal information and use it against you later. The first time I was placed in a foster home, I made the mistake of telling my foster mother and foster siblings living in the placement, why I was removed from my adoptive family’s care…later they would use it against me. So I stopped being so trusting and put a wall up. Like I was a troublemaker versus the victim in the foster homes.

Marquis: I became mute for almost a year after we were taken from our parents. They thought I was crazy or dumb. I wouldn’t talk to anyone, except my sisters and I’d only whisper to them with no [one] around. I didn’t trust anyone. I thought they’d take me away from my sisters. They had me tested and everything at school. I just shut down and felt like no one could understand me. Honestly, I just started feeling more comfortable and trying to trust people, and I’m 24 years old. In school, I felt like an outcast and no one at school helped me feel any different.
Melissa: I had a boyfriend for a couple years in high school, and, mind you, I changed schools like 3-4 times while we were dating. I never told him I was in foster care. I still talk to him this day and never have mentioned it. I don’t like to trust people with the most sensitive and vulnerable part of my life. It’s way too hard to trust people in foster care; you don’t want people feeling sorry for you or people taking advantage of you because you’re in foster care. To this day, I have very little friends because of all the moving around I did as a kid.

Monique, Sparkle, and Maria also described reasons they did not trust those in their support networks, including social workers and counselors:

Monique: I had a warrant for my arrest at 17 years old. My social worker picked me up and helped me clear it. I got it because I ran away from Field group home because I kept telling the staff at the group home, and my social worker, that the girls were bullying me. Finally, I got tired and ran away for a week or two. I couldn’t trust anyone to help me there…I’m not a fan of counseling or sharing too much about me. Why? Unless you’ve been through what I’ve been through, I don’t want to hear what you think I’ve been through…or how bad you feel for what happened to me. That’s not comfort. It’s like talking to someone that doesn’t really care. I don’t trust
people or need them to support my past…I have done it all on my own, and I just keep pushing forward.

**Sparkle:** You can’t depend or trust anyone in foster care or the school. I think you have to look out for yourself. Otherwise, no one will, even though they should because you are just a child…you know they aren’t. That’s sad…to not be able to have an adult or peer to trust.

**Maria:** The only person I trusted was Mr. Vasquez. He was always there for me with school and let me vent about my foster mother. I didn’t like her or how she treated my brother and me. He helped me see how important my high school diploma was in order to get out of her house. He was so cool. I still go visit him and talk to him. I can tell him anything…I can’t wait to tell him in person that I’m pregnant. He will freak out, but I know he will be there for me and be happy…I didn’t feel like the same as everyone, so I had to pretend that I was like everyone. I couldn’t trust people at school…I’d be like ‘That’s my family…my aunt, my uncle.’ I would never let anyone know that I was in a foster home and those were my foster parents. I didn’t want to be different, so I acted like I lived with family.

Participants were divided about whether they were able to rely on others in their lives. While Rose and Maria discussed individuals whom they were able to depend upon,
the other four participants discussed and reflected on not allowing themselves to rely on other people:

**Rose:** I relied on my social worker to help me when I asked for it. You know, call me back when she said she would, and help me get the things I requested but not take forever…she did her job, so it made it a lot easier to [do] my job, which was graduate from high school and get a job. She is a really good social worker and helped me to be in a better place, even now living in transitional housing.

**Maria:** Mr. Vasquez and my first foster mother kept telling me I could graduate from high school and on time. They got me excited to be the first to graduate high school in my family. I wanted to show people it didn’t matter that I didn’t have my mom or was a foster care…if I was having a bad day, I would ask my teacher to go speak with Mr. Vasquez, and he always made time, even if he had to send me back to class and call me out later. If he checked my grades, and I wasn’t doing well, he’d call me out, and help me come up with a plan to fix it or get credits. He was so cool. And, if I did good in my classes, he’d always buy me lunch. After a while, I’d get scared to get a bad grade because I knew he would find out. I wanted to make him proud…you know.
Conversely, Marquis, Melissa, Sparkle, and Maria discussed how those who should have been supporting them were not always there when they needed them. These discussions brought up very strong feelings for the participants, who discussed educators, foster parents, or other professionals as persons they felt should have been reliable adults in their lives:

**Marquis:** I think what foster youth need is a reliable person in their life. Maybe it would be good for a foster youth to find someone that they might have something in common with, like a mentor, because social workers, school counselors, teachers, they are all assigned to the kid but it doesn’t matter if they are compatible. It’s like you’re talking to this adult that knows nothing about what you’re really going through. There’s a lack of compatibility. I would definitely work on improving that for a foster youth, because any child who experienced anything that would do with the loss of their parents, it takes another reliable adult in their life to pull through. I did not have that, and still struggle with who I can depend on…it can get scary.

**Melissa:** I was in a group home at the time, and I got into a verbal argument with a staff member who didn’t allow me to use the phone to call my social worker. I know my rights, and I know what she was doing was wrong. I got upset and tossed all her papers on her desk to the floor…she called the police, and
they arrested me for something dumb, like terrorist threats. I’m sent to juvenile hall, and the next day I see a judge who releases me and gives me probation and community services as my punishment. Within a week, my social worker is still unable to find me a new foster care placement. I literally stayed in juvenile hall for three months! She was the one person that I was supposed to depend on, and she left me in juvenile hall while she slept in her cozy bed every night. No one can tell me that is ok.

Monique: I knew she (foster mother) wasn’t coming back for me, and, honestly, I was used to people not coming back, so I just stopped caring. I realized I don’t need anyone to do anything for me. I am the only person that has to take care of me.

Sparkle: …the unfortunate thing for foster youth is nothing is reliable or consistent. One day, you like the staff at the group home, and, the next week, it’s a new group of staff. One day your foster parents are fine with you, and, the next day, you have to move. School was the last thing I could worry about, and school staff wasn’t making it any easier on me.

Perceptions and Expectations (Foster Youth, Foster Families, Systems, and Communities)

There are often misconceptions about children and young adults in the foster care system. People tend to perceive them as troubled, tough, violent, delinquent, reckless,
parentless, and dangerous (Dent, 2001). During the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with school staff, peers, and other professionals regarding how those adults perceived them, and the impact those perceptions might have had on their educational attainment. Some of the participants described feeling that the adults in their lives labeled them as unsuccessful as soon as they found out they were in the foster care system. This often caused them to struggle to meet the same graduation requirements as their non-foster youth peers, because, once labeled, school staff often lowered their expectations. Rose discussed how her school counselor started out by telling her directly that she had different expectations for her; Marquis and Maria further discussed the negative ramifications of being labeled as foster youth.

**Rose:** My school counselor told me ‘You can graduate with 160 credits because you’re in foster care, rather than the 220 credit to get your high school diploma.’ I felt like she was feeling sorry for me, and I didn’t want anyone feeling bad for me. I don’t deserve more chances or to be treated different. Foster care is just a label. I just think I had to work a little harder personally. Than at home, I’m a problem child versus the victim.

**Marquis:** I tried to hide that I was in foster care from my friends at school and teachers. I was embarrassed. But because I was placed in a teen group home, when I was 4 years old, I caught on to bad habits. I was the class clown after I started talking. My teacher would call my social worker because my group
home workers wouldn’t come to the meetings. But you got to understand...here’s this white lady coming to see me at school. She obviously not related to me because I’m black, so then kids know she’s my social worker. Then, I become the outcast at school because I don’t live with my family. Even teachers act funny. I tell you what, I stopped acting up, just avoid her from coming often to my school! I hated people thinking I couldn’t do anything because I was a foster youth. No one needs to feel sorry me.

Maria: I remember my foster mother thought I was this bad kid as soon as I was placed in her house. She didn’t even know me. Some teachers were like that, too, when they found out I was in foster care. Like if I was a runaway. Like a bad person.

Monique discussed how it was easier to diagnose and label her with “disorders” and over-medicate her, than to support her to achieve:

Monique: I was diagnosed with Bipolar, ADD, and behavior deficit disorder...I was on medications, taking five pills in the morning, five pills at night, and maybe two in the afternoon. I was so drugged up...it’s so sad what they were doing to me. Everyone thought I was crazy, before even getting to know me, just off those diagnoses and the fact that I was in foster care...I eventually stopped taking medication while in a juvenile hall, when I was 17 years old. I never went back to
taking them ever again, and it’s been two years. I lost tons of weight and mind is so clear now. I feel they took advantage of me because I wasn’t living with family. It’s so sad thinking about all those years on so much medication. I needed my family, not medication.

Sparkle frequently talked about how her foster parents were the ones who used labels to silence her and make her feel less capable.

**Sparkle** My first foster mother didn’t really understand the difference between gay and being transgender, because I don’t consider myself gay. I consider myself a straight woman. She’d always give me these speeches ‘God loves homosexuals, but hates the act’. I still dressed as a girl and did my own thing, because I knew I had rights. But I guess it still bothered me because she and others expected me to be something else than which I was. And, of course, I [was] dealing with the label of transgender and foster youth…they had a negative image of me and my worth before even meeting me. No one thought I’d finish school…so why try…Probably the most difficult challenges as a transgender and foster youth was not having my voice heard by anyone…school, foster care homes, social workers. I was not really treated like a human being but like a stigma.
The participants indicated that such perceptions and labels were closely linked to the unrealistic expectations that the schools, child welfare agency, and communities had for them. They were expected to attend school like a typical student, regardless of any recent trauma, the instability from being removed from a school or home placement, or being moved from one foster home to another, and sometimes dealing with the abuse or neglect that led them to be placed in the care of the child welfare agency. For some participants, the abuse continued while in the system as well. Participants candidly shared how they were expected to thrive in their new settings, but that, many times, they experienced deep depression, which made adjustment to foster care difficult and also made it difficult to focus on school, let alone meet the requirements for graduation. For example, Rose talked about the depression that set in when she was first placed in foster care, while Melissa described the negative effects of being sexually abused:

**Rose:** When I first got placed, I woke up the next day thinking ‘What I am doing here?’ I didn’t want to be there. I felt trapped. I felt like I was in prison…to be honest, those days I wasn’t eating nothing. Nothing, just water. For two or three months, because I’d eat maybe one meal a day, I lost 15 pounds. I was so depressed and didn’t want to eat, do school work, or see my biological family. I wasn’t doing work. I wasn’t concentrating. I just wanted it all to go away and be normal again.

**Melissa:** …the sexual abuse jacked me up. It jacked my head up emotionally and mentally. I was just off. I couldn’t focus…I
felt extremely depressed. No ambitions. No motivation to do anything...then moving around in the middle of semesters. You go to one school in one city then move to another school in another city, same grade and same class, but teachers are talking about totally different things. But I’m supposed to excel? I’m supposed to get it together? The expectations schools and social workers hold are not reality, not when you’ve been abused and it consumes you and, on top of that, I got to go to different schools at a drop of change in placement.

Monique and Sparkle further discussed how teacher expectations were really directed toward their failure, rather than their success:

**Monique:** I don’t think anyone expected me to graduate from high school, but I did, even with an IEP. They offered me to graduate with less credits, but I was so against it. I knew that being in foster care didn’t mean anything about my capability. It seems they expected me to fail because I was in foster care.

**Sparkle:** …teachers were super mean. They would call me by my birth name, and not my female preferred name. I felt like some did it on purpose. They would announce I was transgender to the class, and I got bullied and threatened many of times from that. I’d even make a point to speak with teachers before class to let them know that I’d prefer to be called by my female name. No one held them accountable for their ignorance and
actions. I expected more from my teachers and social workers.

Maria, on the other hand, had the opposite experience, and felt that people in her home and school had high expectations for her to complete high school. “Granny [her first foster mother], my brother, and Mr. Vasquez [school staff] expected me to graduate high school. They would always tell me that I could do it. They were very supportive of me”.

Collaboration and Accountability within Systems and Policies

When a child does not have a parent or guardian to be an active advocate for him or her, it can be damaging to his or her physical, emotional, or educational well-being, as well as for his or her healthy developmental progression (Barth et al, 2005; Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). Children and youth in foster care have numerous legal and personal rights that need to be protected and supports that must be put in place for their well-being and educational attainment (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Casey et al., 2003; Frerer et al., 2013; McKlindon et al., 2011; Vacca, 2008; Zetlin et al, 2006). Even though school staff, foster care social workers, school social workers, foster parents, court appointed lawyers, and educational liaisons are at hand, the participants shared their struggles and the obstacles they faced within both systems in terms of collaborating amongst all the adults responsible for their academic success and best interests. Each agency serving this population can better meet the needs of the student by cross-coordinating, partnering, and effectively communicating about services and issues that arise with each youth for whom they are responsible. Talking about collaboration gave the participants from this study an opportunity to reflect on instances when the professionals acting in the place of parents
did or did not do what was expected of them based on the particular positions they held and their responsibilities to assist foster youth:

**Marquis:** No one sat down and said let’s figure out your future. It went as far as let’s fix his behaviors, then it went silent between school and my social worker.

**Sparkle:** I think now that they all (school and social worker) should have worked together and listened to me. Then, they both wonder why you don’t want to go to school, and you tell them ‘Hey I’m having problem here. I need different options.’ I was asking for help and trying to feel comfortable. I think, in general, there needs to be more education on transgender and make sure to not violate their rights. I remember at school they tried to make me use a boys’ restroom, and my social worker never did anything. Then, I searched the internet and found my voice to speak up for myself. Then, I was able to use the faculty restroom as I pleased.

**Maria:** There was this program at my school, that Mr. Vasquez was the tutor. He called my other schools and social worker, trying to help me get my transcripts, so I could graduate. But, before going to this high school, I didn’t have many credits…he is the reason I graduated. I still keep in contact with him and visit him every [time] when I go out there.
Melissa: My foster mother didn’t really force me to go to school. She didn’t say anything. I would just sit at the house and be depressed in my room all day. Prior to sexual abuse happening during this time, I was a straight A student, went to school every day, and was accepted to a special honors bridge program at a local college as an incoming 9th grader. No one from the school came looking for me to discuss my attendance or grades. My social worker never asked why I went from an A student to an F student in one year. No one noticed I was just gone. I completely expected someone to care enough to make that trip to the house to find me and see I needed help.

During this study, participants discussed the fragile link between collaboration and accountability, but there were differences in how some of the participants viewed both concepts. Accountability came into context when participants shared experiences where the professional adults did not fulfill their responsibilities, and, as a result, their daily lives were directly affected. Collaboration and accountability were found to be lacking when school, foster parents, and other professionals neglected the roles they held:

Rose: They should be better at picking people to be foster parents. I think for more foster youth to graduate they need to be supported better in the foster placements and have foster parents be advocates in the school for their educational needs. None of my foster parents, social workers, or school counselors, was all in the same room.
**Monique:** They placed me in a group home for teenagers at six years old. I guess they couldn’t find placement for me. I was there for four months. It was not the right place for a six year old. Someone should have moved me sooner. It’s like they forgot about me. It’s awful to know you’re your waiting to be moved and weeks and months pass, and nothing. It’s like why try?

**Monique:** It came to a point where my social worker wasn’t trying to see me. She’d put a façade in front of my teachers, her supervisor, and foster parents…It came to a point where, if I didn’t ask about, for instance transitional housing, I wouldn’t know about it or be where I am right now. I did that all on my own. But I shouldn’t have to ask anyone them. You’re supposed to be my temporary parent.

**Self-Reflection on Survival as a Student in Foster Care (Attachment or Resilience)**

As discussed in previous chapters, children in foster care tend to have risk factors that can become predictors for negative outcomes, such as non-completion of high school education, homelessness, incarceration, unemployment, and dependency on welfare services (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010, Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007). The six participants in this narrative study provided reflections and shared experiences of their journeys within the child welfare agency and public educational systems, and indirectly discussed attachment or resilience theory played a role in whether they completed their secondary education. These individual statements were taken from
the participants’ interviews, and examined as to whether they fit within the attachment or resilience theory through the data analysis process which thoroughly looked for patterns and themes. As shown in table five, all of the participants experienced one or more of the identified negative outcomes. Therefore, the participants’ shared experiences in this study can be examined through attachment and/or resilience theory lenses for their individual abilities to maneuver through negative outcomes.

**Attachment.** Attachment theory is based on the importance of forming an attachment to the mother or primary caregiver, typically during infancy (Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005). While in the care of the child welfare agency, they are supposed to diligently make efforts to help foster youth adjust to their circumstances and develop long-term healthy relationships that lead to positive outcomes (Mennen & O’Keefe; Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2001). Some of the participants in this study shared their perceptions and experiences with developing such attachments:

**Marquis:** I see the foster care system as institutionalized: the social worker coming to my school, sometimes getting picked up by a van to go to court. Stuff like that has a lot of effects on you because it makes you feel like, no matter how much you do while you’re at school, you’re not going to fit in. I guess being at a place where you feel like you don’t belong has a lot of effects on you mentally. But you are supposed to be successful? Graduate? Not repeat the pattern? I pushed everyone away who had any potential to care for me because it scared me to care about someone. Sometimes, I feel like I do
better by myself. I feel like there’s nobody who I can hurt, and nobody that could hurt me. I still deal with that to an extent. I have a one-year-old that I love and try not to let all of this past stuff affect me being a father to him and being there.

**Melissa:** I have only have a few people that I feel helped me push forward, and continue to be positive people in my life. I still keep in contact with my grandma and grandpa, which are the first foster parents I had. And the other is my mentor, Emily. I met Emily at the courthouse. She used to help foster youth close their juvenile cases. She helped me close my dumb case, and I just felt a strong attachment to her immediately. She was down to earth, dependable, and encouraged me. We’ve actually known each other now for 10 years, and I still call her my mentor, and I ask her to call me her mentee. She has told me ‘Melissa we are like family, why do I need to call you mentee at this point still in our close relationship?’ I think being a mentor is a big compliment. For someone to say I look up to you, I want to be like you, and I want to learn from you, is huge…well, for me. I definitely see her as family, but it would be weird to say that, so I’d rather stick with mentor. I go to her for support and advice. She keeps me grounded and feeling loved.
Maria: Once I opened myself up more to people that could help me or support me, I did better in school. I opened myself because I felt they weren’t going to start judging me for being different…I got over feeling ashamed; it was an obstacle for me to overcome. I had to make up 130 credits by 11th grade, and failed the CASHEE six times…but Mr. Vazquez kept pushing me and would tutor me...He was a good friend to me. He cares about his students. He’d go talk to my counselor and find out what classes I needed, than help me see where I could take them…I still talk to him. He tells me it’s important to be the first to graduate college in my family.

Resilience. Resilience is described as one’s ability to adapt positively despite adversity and/or obstacles. Demonstrating resilience is essential for an individual to continue to develop and have positive outcomes as former foster youth (Flynn et al, 2004). Foster youth typically experienced a significant threat that led to placement, but they can also continue to deal with challenges and obstacles while in foster care (Leve et al., 2012). Some of the participants discussed the adversity they faced as students in foster care and shared their experiences in striving to succeed despite the hardship:

Monique: I knew that I had what it took to graduate. I even remember calling old schools for my transcripts because they were making me repeat classes that I passed at other schools. My school counselor and social worker both would say they requested them, but would not get them, but I was able to get
them. I was able to graduate from high school, and I didn’t need anyone to give me less credits. If I can do it, anyone can, but you have to be determined…you know, no one came to my graduation ceremony…I have no pictures either because I didn’t have a camera at the time…but at the end, I did it, without help. Just sad, though…A lot of people come and go, and it’s like why form an attachment when you know it may not be for very long.

**Sparkle:** I think I was a very strong person growing up. I have to keep pushing forward. Before, I didn’t want to label myself as transgender or foster youth, but then I learned that these things are a part of me and empower me. I didn’t need anyone to accept me, but I finally had to accept myself and move on. When I think of how I just got off a bus in Skid Row in Downtown Los Angeles, and knew no one here, and look here I am making the best life I can. I live on my own, getting my GED, and volunteering at a LGBT center. I’m glad I found my voice and now can be heard.

**Rose:** I could do it. If I really think I could do it, then I know I can do it. This is my life, and no one can decide my fate but me. Even after everything that happened to me, I still knew I needed to graduate and get a job. Foster care was a shelter where I got food and a place to sleep. School was a place I
needed to go to get my diploma…to be honest, foster care was my way out of the abuse, and school was my way out of foster care. All depended on me, and not allowing myself to not just be the victim.

What These Stories Tell Us

This study examined former foster youths’ experiences, reflections, and perceptions about their time in the foster care system while attending public school in Los Angeles County. The findings from this study highlight each of the participants’ experiences within both systems and discuss the roles of professionals to serve and support them. Participants openly shared their perspectives on their journeys, some completing school and some not. Taking into consideration that this is a group of young adults who faced significant threats or severe adversity prior to entering foster care, the public school and child welfare systems, as well as other support systems, attempted to provide a safe and nurturing alternative while they were in out-of-home care. This is a difficult task, not only for educators and other professionals, but also for the youth themselves, as they are placed in alternative environments/foster placements, as they endeavor to complete schooling. The participants’ stories share challenges and obstacles prior to and after placement.

The themes that emerged from the data analysis provide urgent areas for educators and other professionals to evaluate how their roles can assist with changing or creating alternatives to improve a student’s experience while under the care of child welfare system. These stories can also assist the child welfare system to make better decisions when placing youth, changing schools, implementing policies, and supporting
educational attainment. As well as improve training foster parents receive for school age foster youth they have placed in their care. Across the stories, the participants indicated that they were vulnerable and needed support to complete their education, and all wanted to be successful as a student and adult. However, not all of them felt that their needs were met.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusions

Working with at-risk and foster youth within the foster care and public educational systems in the capacity of a counselor, social worker, and advocate, has been a humbling and fulfilling life experience for me for the past eight years. This field of work has had areas of professional struggle for me, mainly in my attempts to increase school completion rates for students in foster care. As a researcher, I decided it was imperative to examine their experiences with and reflections about school completion using narrative inquiry. It became evident while approaching this study that it would be essential to listen to their voices to contribute effectively to this area of work. My goal was to advance the understanding of their personal perspectives and experiences during the time they attended the public school system while under the care of the child welfare agency in the Los Angeles County.

Providing foster youth with the opportunities to share their experiences and perceptions within the context of their choices for safe spaces, time frames, and levels of candidness about difficult topics, allowed insightful narratives that many can learn from to emerge. As an inquiry conducted solely with the purpose of highlighting the participants’ perspectives and experiences about what they wanted and needed from their educational experiences to complete secondary school, this study can assist future students in foster care who face these same challenges. It can also help educators and other professionals as they work to meet the physical, educational, and emotional needs of these children. This study addressed these research questions:
1. What do the stories of adults who grew up in foster care system tell us about its impact on school completion in an urban setting?
   a. What are the participants’ perceptions about the structures of the child welfare agency that helped or hindered them from completing school?
   b. What are the participants’ perceptions about the structures of the public education system that helped or hindered them from completing school?
   c. How do participants perceive the collaboration between the two systems helped or hindered them in completing school?
   d. Who helped or hindered the participants in completing school?
   e. What did the participants do to help themselves complete school?

The study collected narratives of six participants’ experiences and reflections of their journeys as students who went through the public education and foster care systems. The objectives for this narrative inquiry were to: (a) provide opportunities for former foster youth to share their voices through talking about personal experiences, reflections, perceptions, and opinions about the systems that surrounded and basically raised them during their educational journeys and childhoods; (b) to enhance the knowledge of educators and other professional staff working with students in foster care; and (c) to contribute to both the educational and social service fields of literature that support and serve students in foster care to help increase school completion rates.

This chapter describes how the collective narratives of the six participants regarding their experiences in the educational and child welfare systems answered the research questions for this study. The following sections answer those questions and are followed by a discussion and recommendations for practice.
What Do the Stories of Adults Who Grew Up in the Foster Care System Tell Us about Its Impact on School Completion in an Urban Setting?

The main research question for this study focused on the participants’ shared stories (experiences, reflections, and perceptions) to give insight into to the reasons they were able or unable to complete their secondary education. This focus was chosen because, historically, less than 50% of foster youth complete their schooling (Frerer et al., 2013). All six participants had foster care placements and attended public schools in Los Angeles County while under the care of the child welfare agency. The narrative stories shared in chapter four portray the many different and similar experiences that each of these six participants.

Factors Contributing to High School Completion or Non-Completion

While half of the participants completed and graduated from high school in four years, the others were unable to complete the requirements in order to receive their diploma (Table 9), although one completed a GED program and another is currently enrolled and on track to earn a GED diploma. This 50/50 division is aligned with the existing literature on foster youth and high school completion (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Vacca, 2008). Resilience and self-determination are obvious in the stories of the three participants who completed high school on time; they also highlight the importance of developing an attachment to a positive agent who provided continuous guidance and support, as a means to help these participants graduate.

Rose, Monique, and Maria completed high school in four years, but their paths to get there were not direct. Rosa and Monique attended and graduated from typical high
schools in their neighborhoods, but Rose graduated from an alternative education site. Two of the three also had supportive agents who helped them during their time in foster care and who also contributed to this study as informants on their behalf. Maria shared that, had Mr. Vazquez not assisted and supported her, she would not have graduated on time. Rose identified a supportive agent, her social worker, whom she found to be very dependable in assisting her to get the tools and supports she needed to stay focused and graduate on time. However, Rose feels that it was her resiliency and self-determination that enabled her to receive a high school diploma.

The remaining three participants, Marquis, Melissa, and Sparkle, were unable to receive their high school diplomas while in the foster care system. They each shared the academic challenges and personal obstacles they faced attending public school. One challenge Marquis discussed involved traveling long distances to try to stay at the same school to maintain stability when placements changed. Melissa shared her educational and emotional downfall after being sexually abused for years as the biggest personal obstacle she faced, which caused her to not make graduating from high school a priority. Sparkle shared how her challenges being a foster youth and a transgender woman made it difficult to focus on academic subjects while in school.

Table 10

*High School Completion and Non-Completion for the Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High School Completers</th>
<th>High School Non-Completers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rose (alternative H.S.)</td>
<td>Marquis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>Melissa (GED)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Sparkle (GED in process)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Resilience. Even though they were successful in graduating from high school in four years, Rosa, Monique, and Maria stated that they, too, struggled with high school completion and described how those struggles required them to exhibit resilience in the face of change (Flynn et al, 2004; Leve et al, 2012). Each of these participants faced different obstacles. For example, Rose continuously struggled to push for independence because she viewed independence as a means to having a better life as an adult. She juggled school and work, but was challenged by foster placements that did not support her goals. Rose shared,

I’m working and going to school. And you didn’t want to pick me up from work, so I end up walking home…like 9 p.m., and then she’d complain to my social worker that I was coming home too late. I was working! I’m thinking in my head, do you want me on the streets partying?

Monique graduated from high school despite numerous placements, her battle to find emotional balance within her unstable settings, and issues related to being over medicated. Maria was parentless for the first two years of high school before she entered foster care, only to be moved three times in less than a year. However, with supportive agents guiding her, she was able to retrieve over 100 recovery credits from the local adult school, while continuously attending her last two years of high school. Rose, Monique, and María faced academic challenges and personal struggles, but all three of them were able to overcome them.

Rose and Monique described their abilities to overcome or work through the obstacles they faced as depending on themselves. They also talked about the strength
required to continuously believe in themselves and not let labels or statistics that surround youth in foster care affect their personal goals. Their efforts to beat the odds and not become homeless and unemployable because they did not receive a high school diploma dominated their struggles to succeed.

**Attachment.** The three high school graduates also discussed how relationships with individuals helped them to complete high school. Maria described feeling lost until she developed attachments to her first foster mother, Granny, and a teacher, Mr. Vasquez, stating that she would not have been able to graduate without their support and continuous guidance about how to maneuver through the school system. Mr. Vasquez served as an informant for this study. He described how María was a bit guarded about receiving help and support at the beginning of their educator/student relationship, and how that relationship evolved to the point where he continues to support her though she has graduated.

Mr. Vasquez’ main role on campus was to tutor foster youth and assist them to get to graduation on time, a role that he effectively took on with Maria. Even though Maria graduated from high school almost a year before she participated in the study, Mr. Vasquez still maintained a connection with her via text or phone when she needed educational advice or to simply check in with him. The informant talked about María’s history within the foster care system and about her school challenges, without having to look at a file or review notes during his meeting with the researcher. He provided support and alternatives so that she was able to recover 130 credits, which enabled her to graduate from high school on time. Maria was the first member of her family to graduate from high school, and Mr. Vazquez played a large role to help her get to that point.
Maria said he would offer her little rewards, lunch, books, candy, passes out of class when she was having a bad day, anything to get and keep her motivated. When asked what Mr. Vasquez offered Maria that no one else did to assist her in completing school, she stated simply “Inspiration.” Mr. Vasquez responded by talking about Maria’s main struggles with passing the high school exit exam:

Maria took that test six times…I think I was addressing just the fear…she’d get frustrated, and I’d remind her ‘This is not easy. This is something that we’re working on and it’s okay. We’re gonna hang in there. We’re gonna get it.’ She definitely has a resiliency, but I don’t think she recognizes it, though. When things get hard, she says, ‘I give up.’ Then, I would tell her she can do it and show her ways to get it done, and then it’s like nothing is going to stop her…I think we all need that emotional connection that’s going to, like, allow us to sort of develop our inner strength and our inner self, and it kind of needs to come from someone on the outside to help build this up.

Rose shared how her social worker in the child welfare system, whom she asked to be an informant for this study, helped her complete high school. The informant stated that Rose held her accountable for her role in Rose’s life. Therefore, as her social worker, she made it a priority to follow through with requests that Rose had for school and placements. Rose’s informant stated Rose was not the typical foster youth on her caseload because she was self-driven, resilient, and had a plan for her future that only required her social worker to be consistent in the support she requested. The informant
admitted that she tends to make sure to follow through with foster youth who want her help.

Melissa also developed a relationship with a foster care lawyer who eventually became her long-term mentor. Her mentor served as an informant for the study and discussed how Melissa needed such a healthy and dependable relationship in order to complete school and work past her issues. The informant shared that her relationship with participant expanded from legal counsel to mentorship when she followed through with her role as legal support for Melissa to have her records sealed.

Lack of attachments can also interfere with success. Sparkle shared that she found school difficult as a result of being both transgender and foster youth, which caused her not to fit in or make connections with others. Only since living in Los Angeles has she found a desire to go back to school, and is now working to complete a GED. This inspiration happened after meeting another female transgender who is an advocate and speaks out for the rights of the LGBT community in the Los Angeles area. Sparkle shared that not feeling accepted by peers, teachers, and foster homes, and moving from placement to placement interfered with making her education a priority. She prides herself on being resilient and able to adapt to new settings, schools, placements, and cities, and focus on maneuvering through the challenges and obstacles she faces. Sparkle does feel that the foster care and school systems need to find a better way to equally support all youth in their care, as she feels she had to fight her own battles to overcome a lot of her issues. Some examples she gave were fighting to use the female restroom at school, being called by her female name in school and foster homes, and having educators and professionals provide ongoing support to foster youth.
**The search for stability.** Some of the stories shared by the participants involved challenges and obstacles that resulted from numerous placements, which caused instability in school sites and foster homes. They also discussed the challenges caused by continuous abuse while in the foster care system as well as being made to feel like an outcast at school by peers and school staff in that they were seen as a problem to solve rather than as a human being. These challenges often resulted from them not having a “home”, either in their placements or at school.

Marquis, who did not complete high school on time, shared having numerous home and school placements within foster care, which he later described as “fake” or “artificial” settings. He stated living or going to school in a fake setting caused him to lack motivation to complete school, since he could have been gone in a couple of days, weeks, or months. However, Marquis did find some motivation to seek a better future in his fourth year in high school when he learned that he is really good at dancing and creating hip hop music. This became a positive light in his life and assisted him in focusing on something positive, even if it wasn’t graduating high school. It also kept him out of trouble and helped him to make better decisions. At that time, Marquis was finally able to identify someone as a person who supported him and to whom he looked up, but this came too late to enable him complete high school on time. This may have been due to the fact that he does not allow people to depend on him or allow himself to depend on others for fear of being hurt or unpredictable circumstances that can hurt others or himself.

**Abuse.** Melissa’s story is one of continued abuse while in foster care, which made it almost impossible for her to be resilient. She also shared that she was
disappointed at the school and child welfare agency for letting her down by not noticing the signs of abuse. Melissa went from being a straight A student to missing school for months at a time without anyone from either her school or the child welfare agency noticing or questioning her behavior and falling grades. She believes that she would have her bachelor’s degree by now if an educator or other professional had intervened. Many of her friends have already graduated from college, and she thinks she would have attended and completed a four-year degree by now if she had not have suffered from depression related to the abuse that started during her ninth grade year of high school.

Melissa discussed the fact that she did not graduate from high school with a diploma as one of her biggest regrets and the heaviest burden she carries. As an adult, Melissa took and passed the GED exam without studying. She shared that she was one class away from earning her high school diploma but just stopped trying and attending school. She described having a GED and sharing this with others as an embarrassment to her academic ability that labels her as a statistic of the foster care system. A few times during the interviews, she brought up that she struggles to let go of this issue and has also thought of going back to adult school just to earn her high school diploma, even though she is currently attending the local community college and working on an associate’s degree.

Drilling Down to the Heart of the Stories

This main research question for the study has various answers due to the different situations that were experienced before and after the participants were placed in foster care. It is recognized that all participants wanted to attend school and wanted understanding and acceptance from their peers and educators. However, most of them
experienced the opposite once they were placed in care. The participants described the stigma of being labeled a student in foster care, which says to the world that they are parentless, which, for some foster youth, is not true or that they are weak, victims, will be troublesome, have no support, or will not finish school. Although some of these statements were told directly to almost all of the participants, some come from their own thoughts, which leaves little room for positive interactions or the ability to welcome others into their lives. All of the participants wanted to be successful high school graduates and beat the statistics. The following sections drill down to the heart of the stories by answering the sub-questions for this study.

What are the Participants’ Perceptions about the Structure of the Child Welfare Agency that Helped or Hindered Them from Completing School?

This study asked participants to share their perceptions about the child welfare agency with which they were placed to explore whether this system helped them to complete school. Only one of the six participants, Rose, shared that her social worker “…did her job…which allowed me to do my job, which was graduate.” The other five participants stated the child welfare agency hindered them from completing school, even if they did graduate, because they felt the system did not see them as human beings when they moved them around so frequently. They felt, instead, that their social workers met with them monthly and had robot-like conversations that asked the same questions over and over. They felt they should have genuinely tried to capture their individual abilities, support their personal goals, and help them work through the effects of the abuse they lived with to work towards positive adult outcomes.
Most of the participants reflected on the direct effects of being in the foster cares system on meeting graduation requirements and felt it was important for the social workers and the child welfare system to become better at retrieving or gaining access to transcripts in a timely manner. Monique stated:

I don’t know how many times they kept making me take dang Algebra 1, even though I kept saying I took it already…I hated that I had to deal with that every time I had to change schools. I wish that could have been easier, ’cause my dumb social worker took forever to get my transcripts to school all the time.

Although Monique’s shared experience was during a time when AB 490, was in place, the systems still failed to implement the mandates of it. Therefore if transcripts were quickly and effectively provided to new school placement, these students could avoid wasting time retaking courses they already fully or partially completed.

The participants discussed the importance of having social workers and foster parents made aware that they need to play the role of educational advocate and that they must be trained and active in this important position that all children need when in the educational system. None of the six participants had a foster parent who attended parent conferences, open houses, or reviewed grades or classes with them. If a social worker asked about their grades or asked to see them, the response would be a typical “You need to do better.” Melissa explained, “My social worker would ask my foster mother for my grades, and put them in her file; then, that would be the end of it. No discussion. No ‘what’s going on? Why you failing all your classes?’ Nothing.” Lastly, they discussed the need for social workers to be knowledgeable about high school requirements, AB 167
requirements, and alternative educational options to help them complete a high school diploma. Most participants shared that their social workers handed them a paper and told them to speak with a school counselor instead of explaining options or setting up meetings with the student, school staff, foster parent, and social worker. Rose explained:

My social worker told me “You should go see your counselor and let them know you are in foster care. You could just graduate with 130 credits.” I kind of thought, “why does it matter if I’m in foster care or not? It’s just a label.” I wanted to graduate with 230 credits because I knew I could.

**What are the Participants’ Perceptions about the Structures of the Public Education System that Helped or Hindered Them in Completing School?**

This study further examined participants’ perceptions about whether the public education system supported them in completing school. Three of the six participants, Rose, Monique, and Maria, shared their high school counselors, teachers, or school staff assisted them with graduation requirements while under their care, and also informed them about AB 167, an alternative to meeting general graduation requirements for their school district at the time. Rose, Monique, and Maria, refused to use the AB167 alternatives and were able to use other alternative educational options for credit recovery. All participants shared that they would have liked to have the school system improve its management of foster youth, especially helping with tracking down their prior schools for records, transcripts, and partial grades more effectively. Sparkle discussed her frustration, “At some point you just stop fighting for credits you know you have because no one cares and they can never find them. So, whatever, it becomes so frustrating.” Some of the participants stated they would have to retake classes that they had already
successfully completed at their previous schools because the school counselor was unable to locate transcripts and placed them where they thought they should be in terms of which classes they needed to take. Some transcripts took from months to an entire academic year to retrieve, so participants gave up on waiting for the school or social worker to retrieve credits and decided to just retake the courses.

The participants expressed the perception that educators and school staff lacked understanding and training about the foster care system, foster youths’ personal rights, and AB 167 alternatives, on the one hand, but also held the expectation that each student in foster care would be able to hit the ground running in each new school setting. Putting aside the obvious overwhelming feelings that occur when changing schools abruptly, in addition to the impact of being removed from one’s home and dealing with abuse, starting a course already in progress often has negative effects, especially when each course, school, or district may be working on either same course subjects but in different sequences.

**How Do Participants Perceive the Collaboration between the Two Systems That Helped or Hindered Them in Completing School?**

Participants also examined whether both the education and child welfare systems collaborated to assist them in completing school. Three of the participants remembered that some collaboration existed between school staff and social workers. One participant, Marquis, recalled a sort of “quasi” collaboration between his teacher and his social worker in that they worked to help him avoid attention-seeking behaviors so that he would not have frequent visits by his social worker to remind everyone he was in foster care. Another participant, Rose, shared that, if it had not been for her social worker
making the effort to find home placements near her current school, she might not have graduated. She also mentioned her social worker contacted the school to check on her grades and her progress toward graduation requirements. This attention from the social worker was well received by the school counselor who made herself available for the social worker’s queries when needed.

However, collaboration between systems was not always viewed positively because collaboration alone did not support the student. Monique described she despised her social worker’s collaboration with her various schools sites because she was not an active social worker or advocate for her. Therefore, during the meetings with the school staff such as IEP meetings, she felt voiceless and that it was more of a protocol for school staff and the social worker to attend each IEP meeting, rather than a collaborative effort to support her. Monique complained:

My social worker would walk in to an IEP meeting, which I didn’t even know she was coming, with this big ol’ smile. Mind you, we haven’t talked or seen each other, and she’s there for what? To be my advocate? She had no clue what was going on. It was just for face. If she really cared, she would of at least spoken to me prior to meeting and asked if we needed to address anything.

However, all participants shared consensus that, if the child welfare agency and public educational systems were to more effectively collaborate with each other, more foster youth would be on track to graduate or receive the needed support and services to get to graduation. With collaboration between systems, transcripts, records, partial credits, and courses would be efficiently transferred to each school site and foster care
placement. That would facilitate the development of an educational plan for each foster youth to assist with understanding and meeting each district’s high school requirements. Participants described how each system acted according to its own guidelines and protocols, neither attempting to collaborate with the other and therefore only minimally serving the student. Melissa stated:

My social worker is supposed to be like a parent in the absence of my own parent. You’d think someone would call a meeting with the school after their child has been out of school for months. My social worker was like me not going to school was my school’s issue. And my school was like me not going to school was my foster mother and county issue to fix.

Ideally, these participants felt that the social workers were supposed to take on the role of a parent in the school setting, and this role was not always carried out.

**Who Helped or Hindered the Participants in Completing School?**

Participants reflected on their personal journeys and evaluated whether they could identify a person or persons who helped or hindered them in completing school. Melissa and Sparkle shared personal reflections that discussed both the public education and child welfare agencies and held them responsible for the fact that they did not complete their education because they were overlooked as students in foster care. They felt that, without active adults supporting them, their education was placed aside, and academic challenges overlooked. Sparkle stated, “No one cared whether I completed school or not. So, I stopped caring too. So, became boring after that because there was no reason to go.” Melissa felt that her future was tossed aside by neglect or lack of intervention by the school and foster care system. She stated that her potential was thrown away because she
was voiceless and lacked people in her life to be advocates for her educational attainment. Melissa shared:

    I went from being a 4.0 honor student, to failing all my classes. How does no one say, “wait a minute, this doesn’t seem right?” I see my friends, and they graduated college already, and here I am stuck at community college. Still gets me upset that no one took the time to ask me what was wrong.

However, after becoming emancipated, Melissa found a mentor in a foster youth lawyer who assisted her to close her juvenile records. Although now an adult, Melissa was able get the support and encouragement to finish school and continue to the local community college.

**What Did the Participants Do to Help Themselves Complete School?**

    This study asked the three participants who completed school to reflect on their personal achievements as high school graduates and evaluate how they may have helped themselves achieve a high school diploma. Rose and Monique considered foster care to be a label they had to dismiss along with rejecting the negative statistics that might have defined their potential. Both decided to beat the odds and would not let anyone tell them anything different or hold back their potentials to achieve their goals. All three declined to use AB167 alternatives, even though all three met the qualifications for accommodations and all three were missing credits to graduate from high school. However, they took credit recovery courses at alternative educational sites while also attending regular school, so they graduated high school in four years.
These high school graduates stated they never stopped believing they could graduate from high school regardless of struggles they faced. In addition, Rose and Monique discussed the importance of becoming advocates for themselves and speaking up for their own educational needs, which led them to meet graduation requirements. All three discussed that one vital factor was being able to block out what occurred outside of school, whether in the foster placement, court hearings, visits with their biological families, probation issues, changes in schools or placements, or the abuse that originally led to placement.

**Discussion**

This study explored the stories of six foster youth through the lenses of attachment and resilience theories as related to school completion. Attachment theory suggests that children come into the world innately craving to form attachments with others in order to thrive and develop (Bowlby, 1973a; Mennen & O’Keefe, 2005; Page et al., 2006). This theory has relevance for social workers and other professionals who work with foster youth to promote the understanding that it is critical for these young people to develop attachments and healthy relationships with care givers, educators, social workers, and/or mentors to increase the chances of positive outcomes (Mennen & O’Keefe). Additionally, resilience theory suggests that people can overcome adversity and succeed despite traumatic circumstances and obstacles (Connor & Davidson, 2003). Resilience, which is centered on a strengths-based concept (Saleebey, 1996), connotes a person’s capability to successfully deal with positive and negative disruptions. This characteristic is often displayed by youth in foster care who succeed. Resilience is a key factor in the positive outcomes experienced despite the instability of the foster care
system, including changes in placements and school settings (Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). Some participants demonstrated the importance of attachments in their lives, while other demonstrated resilience with or without attachments.

Through the participants’ sharing of their struggles and challenges through the school and foster care systems, it is clear that they all demonstrated resilience for standing firm in a desire to beat the odds for success. Marquis, Melissa, and Maria shared similar experiences related to their needs for or development of attachments with a responsive adult. Once these relationships were formed, they worked toward positive life outcomes, such as graduating from high school or passing the GED exam. During their interviews it was clearly stated that positive relationships with the one or two people whom they identified as trustworthy and reliable are the reason for their biggest successes and support during their hardest times.

On the contrary, Rose, Monique, and Sparkle talked about their abilities to be self-reliant and how they were determined to create positive outcomes for themselves. Each shared examples of their ability to work through trauma, obstacles, and challenges successfully and continue to move towards their personal goals without skipping a beat. Sparkle explained:

Foster youth is nothing but a label, so is being transgender. I was strong and could move past anything. But, before I would stay clear of the labels or titles, because I just wanted to be ‘normal’. Then, I met this woman that is an advocate and also transgender. She made me see how important it is to be proud of all the stuff you faced and surpassed. I was always proud and able to adjust, but now I see how important is to share and
speak up. That will help change things in foster care and society, for transgender and foster kids.

These three participants named themselves as the driving force for where they are now and where they will be in the future. Although each had positive and negative relationships with the adults in their lives, they never stated that those relationships were detrimental to their positive outcomes; in fact, some of the negative relationships pushed them harder to prove others wrong and to prove to themselves that they can accomplish anything. In this subgroup of participants, two of the three graduated from high school in four years while the other participant is currently studying for the GED exam.

This study suggests that foster youth can fall into different categories, either as needing support or being able to self-motivate and self-support, with both leading to either completion or non-completion of school. Five of the participants completed either their high school diploma or passed/were working on the GED exam, and only one has not graduated or received the equivalence of a diploma but was enrolled in a course to take the test. This study demonstrates it is imperative for students in foster care to receive support and services while in school and when transitioning into adulthood. For example, a participant might have graduated that did not, with supports and services while in the attending public school and in the foster care system, which could have provided more positive outcomes and opportunities as a young adult. This study takes a realistic approach to examining the stories of foster youth by focusing on their experiences and reflections about the supports and services they received from both systems.
In this study, the participants’ experiences were aligned with the themes from the literature that address the negative outcomes that foster youth experience (Frerer et al. 2013). All of the participants had experienced one of more of the negative outcome, such as being homeless, not graduating, being incarcerated, or unemployed, etc., at some point in their lives (Counseling, Student Support, & Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007). This study differed from most literature on foster youth and their academic attainment, or lack thereof, due to its focus on the youth and not on the voices of the support providers. It was vital to hear how the policies, laws, services, supports, and systems helped the participants to achieve positive educational outcomes or fail to do so; these stories could only come from the clients who were receiving the services and advocacy.

However, some studies connect the importance and the need for all systems to focus on the poor education outcomes for foster youth and make efforts to connect and join forces through essential and efficient case management of an individual’s overall needs through interagency collaboration, data sharing, leadership, etc. (Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007; Weinberg et al., 2009; Weinberg et al., 2014; Zetlin et al., 2006). What the participants added was the last piece of the puzzle in this effort to support more foster youth to graduate from high school and achieve positive outcomes in adulthood. They further shared their experiences with the different agencies and whether they provided the services and supports intended to meet the needs of the youth they serve.
Recommendations

The findings in this study support recommendations for best practices and policies within the educational and social work fields to better support and increase positive outcomes for foster youth, specifically in relation to high school completion. This study found that through the voices of the participants shared that most of their experiences with educators and social workers, that those professionals knew little about differing systems, and some were not thoroughly knowledgeable about their own system’s practices and policies to better serve the youth in their care. Therefore, professionals should make efforts to increase their knowledge about foster youths’ personal rights within the child welfare agency and public educational systems. They should also make efforts to learn about the different requirements for each system so that they can work together to increase success within the school setting.

The participants wanted and needed more collaboration between the systems, which would primarily include educators, school counselors, social workers, foster parents, and/or other professionals that provide support and services to them. If educators and other professionals collaborated more with each other, the links missing or lacking from a student’s graduation requirements could be attended to more efficiently and thoroughly so that she or he can graduate in four years. This would include collaborative case management for each foster youth placed at a school site and continued monthly checks-ins and also check-ins each semester after final grades are posted and annually to see their progress toward graduation. Collaboration between systems would also assist the school with retrieving records, transcripts, partial credits, IEPs, etc., to better serve the students’ educational needs. As well as having electronic
school records for foster youth versus paper transcripts that can take a few days to send out by mail, so they could be quickly transferred to a new school.

The participants indicated that, in addition to them being successful in school, graduating on time was based on whether they were able to obtain all of their transcripts, credits, and partial credits from previous school settings. There are social workers, educational liaisons, and foster parents that are to retrieve these vital documents, but in these shared experiences by participants these professional roles fell short in doing so efficiently. There are steps for this to occur with the proper check out of a student but that does not always happen. In an ideal situation, a child is checked out of the school s/he attends before changing placements to another foster home because the change in placement might also necessitate a change in school. However, most participants shared experiences where they were abruptly moved and could not return to the original school to wrap up course work, which could lead to partial credits, assignments’ not being submitted, or exams not completed for full course credit. Developing an educational plan at the school site specifically for this subgroup of students, including an entrance interview/meeting, would assist in transmitting knowledge regarding educational history and the supports needed by them to be successful at new school. An additional exit interview/meeting would wrap up all pending work for courses and include a discussion about full or partial credits that should be applied to a student’s transcripts based on AB 490, along with recommendations to the new school site to continue to support the student’s academic progress and would facilitate a smoother transition to a new school. If a youth was removed abruptly from a foster placement, then the social worker would have to make the effort to return student to school site, have exit interview and retrieve
credits, partial credits, and transcripts, in order for a smoother transition to next school, or have discussion if it is feasible for student to remain in school of origin during the exit interview.

This educational plan would also assist in collaboration among school staff, foster youth, foster parents, and social worker, add discussions about the reasons for change in placement, and include the possibility for the student to remain in his or her current school with extra supports like transportation, closer home placement options, and/or counseling. The entrance and exit interviews and meetings might also assist with saving a home placement, keep the student at the same school, and/or detail the number of times a student has been moved within a school year. This knowledge would help address the issue of instability, which is a major factor for negative outcomes for this population (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Counseling Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007; Shea et al., 2008; Weinberg et al, 2003). This educational plan could physically travel with the student and also be made digital for use within a shared a data and tracking system, accessible to the California public school system, child welfare agencies, and to the student to facilitate the transition. Currently in California, there is an Educational Passport that supposed to be transferred with change of placements for foster youth, even though it was in the law, it never effectively worked well, as in these shared experiences from participants.

One of the issues that came up in this study is that social workers typically have 40 to 60 children on their caseloads at any given time. In comparison, at school sites, there is typically a school counselor who meets with his or her assigned students and has
a caseload ranging from 300 to 500 students. Although school districts are required by AB490 to have a designated school staff member serve as a foster youth educational liaison, it might not be his or her entire job, or one staff member might be designated to serve as the liaison for the entire district. Therefore, the majority of foster youth in the California public school system are not having their needs met in terms of case management, which may contribute to the high dropout rates for foster youth in Los Angeles County. Although there has been some success with education liaisons in terms of better school outcomes within some areas of California when working closely with foster youth and linking systems (Weinberg et al., 2009). However, more reform is needed with current policies and laws that are already in place to serve the foster youth, but continue to not be a part of educators and other professionals best practices in meeting the needs of the student. In addition, Los Angeles County has been subject to cuts to school budgets and the number of support service positions, which further contributes to the issue.

During the course of this study, in late 2013, Local Control Funding (LCFF) restructured the way California receives funds for education, and has now made students in foster care their own subgroup, which will hold districts accountable to improve their educational outcomes (Barrat & Berliner, 2013). LCFF recommends that this funding be delegated in ways to provide support and services to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout rates among these students. As a result of this funding structure, one of the largest school districts in California expanded their foster care program and increased the current number of foster youth case managers/counselors for almost 15,000 students to 85 for the 2014-2015 academic school year. Taking such immediate action will
provide direct client contact and support services, which is needed to assist in closing the achievement gap and meeting the needs of these students. In addition, the California Department of Education will now inform schools districts of foster youth in their district on a weekly basis.

The participants recommended improvements to foster parents’ engagement to help students complete high school. By encouraging them to become more actively involved with the educational system, the student will receive well-rounded academic support at home and in the school setting, as many of their peers receive from their biological parents. A school’s engagement with these parents can be achieved by providing foster parents with monthly educational trainings that discuss current general high school requirements and AB 167 as an alternative option for some foster youth. It is also important to provide local community resources and supports to assist these children in the home setting and to assist foster parents in dealing with issues that might lead to changes in placements. The school system and child welfare agency would be able to collaborate during these monthly meetings and offer training for foster parents who attend meetings, since they must complete a certain number of certified continuing education credits per year for recertification as foster parents in California.

From my experiences with working with these parents, I know that they typically have more than one foster youth in their home and will continue to care for numerous others who come in and out of their homes and who will attend the same local schools. Therefore, building relationships between them and the local schools is important because, when a foster youth leaves the school, it is highly like that same adult parent will enroll another child. As well as providing essential training to foster parents will
lead to meeting the needs of not only their current child, but those who will be placed in their home in the future, and may provide a smoother transition into and exit out of this particular placement.

The next recommendation was developed by Marquis, who stated that foster youth lack positive and reliable relationships that also provide guidance during different stages of growth like the transition to adulthood. He felt that most of his relationships with the adults in his life were inauthentic and were viewed as duties that educators and other professionals needed to complete. He felt there was no connection or genuine concern for him or his future. Therefore, he recommended that a mentorship program be developed for adult former foster youth to mentor youth still under the care of the child welfare agency to provide insight, empathy, and guidance by listening, sharing experiences, challenges, and obstacles. This type of mentorship program could bridge gaps for youth feeling lost and without connections and they might open up more to someone who understands their circumstances because they too lived through and survived them. This type of program could also provide an opportunity for these young adults to give back to children who are just like they use to be, which can be very fulfilling and healing. Ideally, to develop such a program, schools and/or child welfare agencies could partner with transitional housing programs that meet the needs of adult former foster youth and provide incentives for the adults to become mentors. Furthermore, if more students in foster care can see how a high school diploma will benefit them, it might help to increase graduation rates. This type of mentoring program might lead to the development of attachments and stability within a long-term
mentor/mentee relationship, like one of the participants in this study experienced with her mentor.

Lastly, the most important recommendation is for educators, other professionals, community members, and policy makers serving foster youth to remember that this subgroup of students often consists of victims of abuse and/or neglect, and most carry deep emotional scars. Most likely, these children are not in the system because they are “bad kids,” as one participant described, but because of circumstances out of their control. By distinguishing these students as victims of a crime, abuse, neglect, or other negative circumstances, educators and other professionals can see how their strength and resilience gets them to come to school and attempt to function as a typical student. It is important for these professionals to understand that this might be a child’s third, fifth, or fifteenth home placement, that this might be his or her second or tenth school setting within the last two years or that, as he or she sits lost in the classroom, this might be the third time this student is taking Algebra IA because no one can locate transcripts from another district. This might be the first time the student has been separated from his family and siblings, he has just been placed with a foster family two days ago, and is attending new school with no friends, and nothing familiar to surround him or comforts him. It could be that a student now wishes she had not spoken up about the abuse that pulled her from her last placement because anything would be better than having to start all over in a scary new placement and new school. These students need us to do our best as professionals and provide guidance and support with compassion and reliability. They need to know that we will each do our assigned job to provide them with the highest possibility of positive outcomes for them as a student and an adult.
Concluding Remarks

This study set out to give young adults formerly in foster care an outlet to share their experiences and stories as students and provide insight and understanding so that educators and other professionals can improve opportunities for these students to complete their schooling and have positive outcomes in adulthood. Most of the qualitative and quantitative research that has been published on the topic of foster youths’ low graduation rate tends to have the subjects of the study be educators, other professionals, and foster parents, with minimal narratives solely based on the actual at-risk group being served by those parties (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2008; Conger & Rebeck, 2001; Counseling, Student Support, and Service-Learning Office, 2010; Frerer et al., 2013; Lips, 2007; Shea et al., 2008; Weinberg et al, 2003). Therefore, how as professionals can we be alarmed by the poor outcomes for so many foster youth, when we have not heard enough of what we can do better or change in order to assist them to be successful adults within our communities and schools?

The participants in this study were open about their complicated pasts prior to entering foster care, their time in the system, and the transition to their current adult lives. When beginning the interviews, the researcher and participant drew a timeline to show placements, age of placement, grade level, city of placements, and reasons for change in placements. With all of the participants, it became an overwhelming and confusing process that involved multiple member checks and caused changes in the timelines. It was humbling to know that I grew up in the same house and went to the same local schools with the same friends, whom I still have reliable connections with today and sad
to understand that, if I lost family, stability, and connectedness to my friends, teachers, and school, I might not be at this educational level because it might have just been too much to continue to fight and bear. All participants overcame those challenges and obstacles and showed up to each interview ready to share, just like so many students in our public schools and child welfare systems show up to school and are willing to work towards their high school diplomas. It is imperative that educators, other professionals, and policy makers make it a priority to improve the education and graduation rates for this population and decrease their poor outcomes for the better of our students, school, and communities.
REFERENCES


Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services


Fletcher v. People, 52 Ill. 395 (1869).


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People v. Benson, 6 Cal. 221 (Cal. 1856).


APPENDIX

Former Foster Youth Interview Protocol – Sample Questions

1. What age did you first enter the foster care system?

2. How many placements did you have while in foster care?

3. How well were you able to adapt to change?

4. How many schools did you attend while in the foster care system, and overall?

5. What were some of the most difficult challenges for you as a youth in foster care?

6. Did past circumstances give you confidence for these challenges?

7. What were some of the most difficult challenges for you as a student in foster care?

8. How is your educational experience the same or different than other students at your school?

9. Was it relatively easy to get close to others while in foster care?

10. Where you able to depend on others while in foster care? If so who?

11. Reflecting back what sources of support, if any, did you find at your foster home and in the community?

12. Reflecting back what sources of support, if any, did you find both on and off school campus? What things would make your school experience easier?

13. What are you aspirations in life?

14. What challenges, if any, do you foresee in realizing these aspirations?

15. What kinds of stereotypes are out there regarding youth in foster care by school staff?

16. What kinds of stereotypes are out there regarding youth in foster care by peers?
17. What kinds of stereotypes are out there regarding youth in foster care by foster care givers?

18. Did any of these stereotypes affect you growing up within the foster care system?

19. Did any of these stereotypes affect you with schooling completion or not completing school?

20. What was the most difficult obstacle you may have faced as a foster youth in school?

21. Did you find it difficult for others to get close to you while in foster care?

22. What did you expect your high school experience to be like? Did it live up to your expectations?

23. Did you receive assistance with school assignments or projects from your care giver? Social worker? Tutor from the county?

24. How did you spend your time when you were not in school? Work? Visits? Extracurricular activities?

25. What are some of the school support and services you may have used, and how were they helpful – or not helpful – to you?

26. How often did your see you social worker? What was the average time length of each meeting? How many social workers did you have while in foster care? What were your experiences with them? How often did your social worker or care giver attend school meeting, provide advocacy in school setting, and/or meet with school staff regarding grades, behavior, attendance, or support services?

27. Do you think completing high school was/is important for you and your post foster care life?
28. What goals did you have in high school about completing school and attending higher education? Who assisted you in attaining these goals? What might have hindered you from accomplishing these goals?

29. Can you identify one person or more that was influential in you finishing school? Do you still have a relationship with anyone that worked with you while in foster care system?

30. Reflecting back do you feel you made any important connections or relationships needed while in school, either in school, home, or community setting?

31. If you could share one piece of advice with foster youth currently in high school, what would it be?

32. If you had the power to change anything about the educational system so more foster youth graduate, what would you change and why?

33. If you had the power to change anything about the foster care system so more foster youth graduate, what would you change and why?

34. Reflecting back, did you develop any relationships in foster care that were detrimental to whether you completed school or not?

35. Reflecting back, did you feel that you were in control of your life or others held your future in their hands?

36. Reflecting back, did you ever feel hopeless and give up on educational goals for yourself while in foster care?