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## School Administrators' Perceptions on Teaching Foster Children

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Tisha Hess

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Walden University  
2021

Abstract

School Administrators' Perceptions on Teaching Foster Children

by

Tisha Hess

MS, Eastern Illinois University, 1999

BS, Millikin University, 1998

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

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## Abstract

Children in foster care face multiple barriers compared to their nonfoster peers, especially as it pertains to their educational success. The problem was school administrators, such as principals and assistant principals, face greater challenges in meeting the educational needs of foster children in addition to balancing the extraneous issues foster children face. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois. The specific focus was on administrators' role in curriculum design, support services, and ability to address behavioral issues in the school setting. After COVID-19 pandemic related modifications were made to the data collection method, interview questions were sent out electronically to elementary school principals and assistant principals within one school district in Illinois. Using open and priori coding techniques, the data were analyzed for trends and patterns and five themes emerged. These themes were (a) needs/barriers around support within the student experience, (b) general and instructional challenges facing school administration, (c) collaboration and the impact on student experiences, (d) support services/resources impacting student and teacher, and (e) changes needed to serve foster students in the educational setting. The data derived from this study will be used to inform practice for child welfare and educational staff, to aid in the development of specific educational service plans, and to promote awareness of environmental and demographic components as it pertains to elementary foster students.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the foster children who have blessed me with their presence, whether briefly or long term. It is because of them that my life's mission was realized. It is because of them my work continues in mending the broken souls that filter through a well-intended, but fractured system. I also dedicate this dissertation to my fellow educators who somehow manage to make magic for their students despite sparse resources, anemic support, and overwhelming need.

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## Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background of the Study .....	3
Problem Statement.....	5
Purpose of the Study.....	9
Research Question .....	10
Theoretical Framework.....	10
Nature of the Study.....	11
Assumptions, Scope, and Delimitations .....	13
Significance of the Study.....	15
Summary and Transition.....	16
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	17
Theoretical Framework.....	17
The Foster Care System Framework.....	20
Stakeholders.....	23
Complications of the Foster System Framework.....	29
Unique Needs of Foster Youth .....	30
Behavioral and Mental Health Needs .....	31
Relational Needs.....	32
Physical Needs.....	33
Emotional Needs.....	34
Educational Experiences of Foster Youth.....	34



Educational Outcomes .....	35
Educational Barriers and the Foster Care System.....	37
Elementary Education and Foster Care System.....	43
Summary and Transition.....	44
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	46
Introduction.....	46
Research Design and Rationale .....	46
Role of the Researcher .....	48
Methodology.....	51
Participants and Recruitment .....	51
Instrumentation .....	55
Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis .....	56
Modified Interviews.....	56
Coding.....	57
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	59
Credibility (Internal Validity).....	59
Transferability (External Validity) .....	60
Dependability .....	60
Confirmability.....	61
Conclusion .....	61
Chapter 4: Results.....	63
Demographics .....	65

Data Collection .....	66
Data Analysis .....	66
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	67
Results.....	68
Theme 1: Needs/Barriers Around Consistent Support Within the Student	
Experience.....	69
Theme 2: General and Instructional Challenges Facing School	
Administration, Support and Instruction.....	71
Theme 3: Collaboration has an Impact on Student Experiences .....	74
Theme 4: Support Services/Resources Impact Student and Teacher	
Experiences .....	77
Theme 5: Changes Needed to Serve Foster Students in the Educational	
Setting .....	79
Triangulation.....	80
Summary.....	81
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	83
Introduction.....	83
Interpretation of Findings .....	83
Theoretical Context.....	89
Limitations of the Study.....	90
Recommendations.....	90
Implications.....	91

Conclusion .....	93
References.....	95
Appendix A: Interview Questions .....	121
Appendix B: Email/Letter.....	122

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines maltreatment as “the abuse and neglect of children under 18 years of age” (WHO, n.d., para. 1). The types of maltreatment recognized by most states are neglect, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, and sexual abuse, with neglect and physical abuse having the greatest percentage of occurrence amongst victims (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Victims may suffer a single form of maltreatment or a combination of maltreatment types (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Maltreatment has been recognized to be a public health concern and social problem because of the devastating physical and psychiatric consequences it presents (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017; Kemp et al., 1962). Historically, child battered syndrome involved the use of excessive physical punishment and/or the failure of primary caregivers to meet the basic physical and emotional needs of their children (Kemp et al., 1962). However, prior to the 1960s, corporal punishment dispensed by adults was acceptable practice with sparse governmental intervention occurring (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publication Project, 2014). Research from Kemp et al. (1962) offered clinical evidence of the non-accidental injuries, such as malnutrition, chronic neglect, and physical battering, suffered by children caused by adults. This data served as a catalyst for federal and state policy reform regarding mandated reporting systems, referral processes, and funding allocations toward child welfare.

Maltreatment prevention efforts designed to negate the negative effects of abuse and neglect continued after the 1960s. In 1853, Charles Loring Brace began advertising

the need for homes for immigrant children living on New York streets (National Foster Parent Association, 2019). Families provided free homes for the immigrant children, and although many became indentured servants, the foundation of the current foster system was formed (National Foster Parent Association, 2019). In the early 1880s, non-governmental organizations, such as private and religious groups, began forming to protect children from excessive corporal punishment (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publication Project, 2014). State governments became involved, passing laws that mandated payment to families who boarded children too young to be indentured, licensing families who boarded two or more unrelated children, and allocating funds to organization for public childcare work (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publication Project, 2014). In addition, governmental intervention continued in 1912 with the formation of the Children's Bureau and with mandates involving record keeping, specific children's needs, foster home inspections, and familial services (National Child Abuse and Neglect Training and Publication Project, 2014; National Foster Parent Association, 2019). Furthermore, specific individuals, such as law enforcement, educators, medical personnel, and childcare workers, were expected individuals in reporting alleged cases of child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017).

The recognition of child abuse and neglect is evident throughout history since the 1900s. The *Minimum Standards of Child Welfare* and the *Foster-Home Care for Dependent Children* publications, both devised by the Children's Bureau in the 1900s, acknowledged the importance of placing children with foster families if the original home

life is not suitable or if institutional care is the other option (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2018). Regardless of foster home or institutional placement, foster children often struggle with behavioral, emotional, discipline, and social issues, particularly evident within the school-age population (Blome, 1997; Vanderfaeillie et al., 2012). Despite acknowledgement of the educational struggles of foster children, progress is still needed in understanding the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth. Chapter 1 of this study includes the background, problem statement, and purpose of this study as the foundation of this research. In my discussions of the theoretical underpinning, nature, assumptions, and significance of this study, I will highlight the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of school administrators in teaching foster children.

### **Background of the Study**

The terms child abuse and neglect have varying definitions according to state standards, but federal law provides a foundation for states to formulate their own definition and practices accordingly. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA, P.L.100-294) and amendment CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 (P.L. 11-320) mandates the minimum definition of child abuse and neglect to be:

Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitations; or an act of failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.

All 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Territories utilize this definition to craft and enforce laws that protect the health and well-being of children by mandating

certain professionals and institutions to recognize and refer on neglect, physical abuse, psychological maltreatment, and or sexual abuse suspicions (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018).

Recognizing child abuse and neglect and ensuring the safety and well-being of children falls not only within the purview of governmental and professional personnel, but is also a responsibility of indirect stakeholders. Indirect stakeholders include friends, relatives, neighbors, and others who do not have professional encounters with the child (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018). This group submits approximately 18% of alleged abuse and neglect referrals (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018).

Once child abuse and neglect is understood and recognized, responsible parties can devise and implement a service plan that reestablishes safety and health for the abused. This plan may include the child's entrance into the foster care system of the Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS). Foster care is a temporary placement of the child in a relative home, nonrelative home, group home, residential facility, emergency shelter, or supervised independent living (Child Welfare Gateway, 2018). Individual states provide this temporary service to ensure child safety and health while the primary caregivers guilty of inadequate care, develop the skills and knowledge necessary to create and maintain a stable, safe environment (Child Welfare Gateway, 2018).

Although the foster care system is meant to protect children from further abuse and neglect, there are challenges in the system, particularly in the educational arena. When adverse circumstances require child welfare agencies to remove children from the home, the child may also face movement away from their home school and social environments. When school mobility occurs, foster children experience negative educational outcomes when compared to their nonfoster peers (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Kaariala et al., 2018; Ward, 2009). Decreased reading and math achievements, poor social competency, and poor record transfer associated with school mobility contribute to the academic adversity of foster children (Berger et al., 2015; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Pear et al., 2010). School administrators and school personnel must manage the increased vulnerability of academic failure in foster children.

### **Problem Statement**

Aside from behavioral and mental struggles, foster children also experience academic and learning challenges. Weak academic backgrounds, failure to meet grade level academic expectations, and difficulty transitioning to classroom routines contribute to negative education outcomes of foster children (Zetlin et al., 2012). Furthermore, educators face challenges in meeting the educational needs of their foster students. Poor foster caregiver involvement, absent or reduced background information, minimal school support, and lack of supportive adults are challenges faced by educators of foster students (Jaffee et al., 2018; Zetlin et al., 2012). The problem is that poor collaboration and communication among school personnel, caregivers, and child welfare agencies (e.g., Stone & Zibulsky 2015; Zetlin et al., 2012) contributes to foster children's continued



experience of different and often negative educational outcomes compared to their nonfoster peers.

Meeting the educational needs of foster children in addition to balancing their extraneous issues can be challenging for educators and for school personnel. Foster children are at greater risk for multiple negative outcomes, including those outcomes pertaining to educational performance and attainment (Kaariala et al., 2018; Kirk et al., 2012). Increased high school drop-out rates, decreased graduation rates, increased expulsion rates, decreased GED completion, and increased educational disruption because of mobility contribute to educational failure of foster children (Blome, 1997; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). Furthermore, foster youth living with foster families receive less financial assistance and lower caregiver support for educational experiences than youth living with at least one parent or guardian (Blome, 1997).

In addition, most foster children have varying degrees of behavioral, emotional, discipline, and social issues, which are often also evident in the educational environment (Blome, 1997; McGuire & Jackson, 2019; Vanderfaeillie, et al., 2012). Along with lower educational attainment, foster children have increased incidence of chronic health problems, including mental disorders, regardless of the time spent in substitute care (Casey Family Programs, 2004; Conn et al., 2016; Hillen & Gafson, 2015, Turney & Wildeman, 2016; Zimmerman, 1982). However, long term foster care may not be a detriment to the child's functioning because the environment is often healthier than what is provided by the primary family who may not have resolved the issues that necessitated

the original removal (Zimmerman, 1982) and because a supportive adult throughout and in their lives promote better educational outcomes into adulthood than those who had less support (Jaffee et al., 2018). School personnel are not informed of the foster student's information and impending issues, thus leaving valuable resources untapped (Morton & Berardi, 2018; Zetlin et al., 2012).

More specifically, meeting the educational needs of foster students may be a particular challenge for schools in areas that face additional deficits. One school district in Illinois, specifically, has higher rates of child abuse and neglect per capita than other county in Illinois (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2014). In addition, 62% of students in this district are raised in low-income households, receive public aid, live in substitute care, or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). These conditions contribute to many challenges for parents, families, and the school system. The negative outcomes to which foster children are already more susceptible (educational performance, as well as behavioral, emotional and social issues, mentioned above) may be magnified in this setting.

While the literature suggests and supports the academic struggles from a student and an educator perspective, existing research does not address the educational experiences, perceptions, or solutions of school administrators at the elementary level and their ability to provide curriculum, designate instruction, and offer additional support for foster children, especially those who have experienced abuse or maltreatment and may have additional, unique needs. More information is needed, specifically, for schools and districts that face additional challenges with their student population (i.e., poverty, poor

nutrition, child abuse and maltreatment), on how to provide education, integration, and success among these students. Poor cross-system communications, particularly between the educational and governmental agencies, unclear role understandings, and conflicting federal and state laws contribute to the recurrent frustration amongst school personnel and child welfare workers (Noonan et al, 2012). Biased behaviors amongst school personnel hinders foster youth from enrolling in college preparatory classes, from pursuing advanced training, and from attaining advanced degrees even though they achieved similar test scores and grades as their non-foster peers (Blome, 1997). Levy et al. (2014) noted this biased behavior included judgement and stereotyping by educators as foster children were thought of as trouble and were thought to behave like their parents. Biased behavior negates the appropriate services and instruction for foster youth because educators prejudge current foster students based on their experiences of the past teaching foster youth (Levy et al., 2014).

School and agency collaboration in sharing confidential information on foster youth and obtaining timely information is a source of confliction as law interpretation and differences in training, agency rules, and practice norm make it difficult to formulate a plan for educational success (Noonan et al., 2012; Zetlin et al., 2010). Furthermore, federal and state laws, such as Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, although well intended in protecting educational confidentiality and records, often contradict one another, leaving districts and states to interpret the requirements differently (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010).

In addition, the added factors of abuse and poverty in Illinois may create additional challenges for these school administrators. It is important for researchers and practitioners to understand the unique experiences and challenges of providing an education to foster students. This includes administrators' role in curriculum design, support services, and ability to address behavioral issues. In this study, I focused on school administrators' experiences of providing an education to foster students in one such school district in Illinois.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois, focusing on their work teaching and supporting foster children especially who have suffered abuse or maltreatment. Specifically, I focused on administrators' role in curriculum design, support services, and ability to address behavioral issues in the school setting. Administrator and educator understanding of the unique needs of foster youth is critical to improving educational outcomes (Levy et al., 2014). The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (2014) states one specific district in Illinois has higher rates of child abuse and neglect per capita than other counties in Illinois. In this study, I focused on this specific district in Illinois. Within this school district, 66.2% of students come from low-income households, receive public aid, live in substitute care, or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). In this case study, I interviewed school administrators of public elementary schools and explored school-level data on trends among students

who are in foster care. It was important to understand the experiences of school administrators who work with foster youth and the affect this has on other educators and administrators, students, as well as the school district.

### **Research Question**

The research question that guided this study was: What are the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois, with respect to teaching and supporting foster children, especially those who have experienced abuse or maltreatment?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Ecological theory was the theoretical framework for my study. The theory describes interactions between the individual and the setting, as well as how context plays a role in the emergence of and maturity of human growth and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The developing human functions within Bronfenbrenner's varying levels of structure, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) and within a comprehensive network of organizations (Colvin et al., 2020).

The *microsystem* level involves the immediate and physical characteristics in which the individual is immersed (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The interactions within a home, school, or employment setting help or negate individual growth. The microsystem level has the most influential impact on human development because it represents the immediate and direct environment the individual is functioning in (Hong et al., 2011). The *mesosystem* involves the interactions of multiple components of the microsystem

(Rosa & Tudge, 2013; Stapleton & Chen, 2020). Parents involved in school activities or employers providing familial services connect the individual systems denoted within the microsystem level. The *exosystem* involves the elements that are not directly involved in the setting but provide a supportive framework for the developing individual (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). A parent's workplace, for example, plays an exterior role in development, but nonetheless, impacts the individual and familial development. The *macrosystem* level involves the specific institutional systems of a culture an individual lives within, such as political, educational, ethical, religious, and economic contexts, that impact the individual development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The religious group a foster child is involved in or the state/local senators lobbying for child protection laws represent specific systems that form a broader cultural setting in which the child functions.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I used the qualitative approach. The qualitative method was an appropriate fit for my research question and purpose. The qualitative approach involves an overarching concept in which the researcher can explore a variety of issues and perspectives (Van Maanen, 1979). Specifically, I used a case study design (see Yin, 2017) to collect data from administrators and teachers who work to support foster students who have suffered abuse and maltreatment. I used this approach to understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges that these individuals encounter in their work with foster students within one school district in Illinois.

Qualitative research has been employed by many researchers in this field. Although previous researchers have focused on the academic risks of the foster

population (mainly quantitative analyses), Stone et al. (2007) used a qualitative approach by interviewing child welfare workers and educational personnel (including directors, principals, liaisons, superintendents, and regional directors) to highlight the existence of organizational barriers between child welfare and educational agencies that contribute to academic outcomes. Similarly, Zetlin et al. (2010) conducted group sessions to elicit an understanding of how school, home, and child welfare agencies operate independent of each other and lack a shared approach of what is needed. In this study, I incorporated the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth to gain a better understanding of the barriers within the educational arena.

There are approximately 415,000 children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The average age of youth in care is 7, while the average mean time spent in care is 19 months (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The age and length of stay falls within the timeframe of educational exposure, thus potentially impacting the foster student's educational status.

This study included a small sample of school administrators and educators in one school district to represent the larger population of school personnel within the United States. According to Sheparis et al. (2010), it is important to ensure that a purposeful selection occurs of a specific population to explore concepts more effectively. In my study, I used criterion sampling and snowballing (discussed further in Chapter 3) to solicit participation from administrators, I used individual interviews, district data, and

school data review to create and manage group profiles that may highlight trends and patterns, as well as achieve the methodological triangulation necessary.

### **Assumptions, Scope, and Delimitations**

In this study, I made several assumptions. My first assumption was that the specific focus on elementary education would present additional information on the challenges and barriers administrators in this domain can be further understood. Secondly, I assumed the interviewed school administrators would provide answers based on their own professional experiences and have had the adequate experience to answer. Thirdly, I assumed that the use of the ecological theory represented an accurate theoretical framework in understanding the educational challenges presented to school administrators when teaching foster children.

This study also had several limitations. First, gaining access to local, public elementary school administrators was a challenge, particularly with their roles temporarily breaking during months of school district breaks and during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, I was forced to adjust my data collection method because school personnel, including principals, assistant principals, and educators faced an immediate and unprecedented change/adaptation to their career and their availability was dramatically impacted with the 2020 spring school coursework moving fully online. Principals and assistant principals by nature of their leadership roles commonly maneuver through challenges involving student outcomes, budgetary cuts, personnel tensions, and staff turnovers (Norbert & Gross, 2019). However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Ahlstrom et al. (2020) noted principals were challenged to manage the anxiety of pupils,



parents, and staff; to manage the fluctuations of uncertainty; and to manage the students left behind with the shift to electronic learning. The pressure on principals to remain in their leadership role during uncertain times was increased, despite a decrease in their ability to make school-related decisions because of district, state, and federal mandates (Stone-Johnson & Weiner, 2020). Because of these multiple and added challenges for principals, obtaining a sufficient sample was a limitation. Secondly, this study was limited to one school district in Illinois, so the results may not be transferrable to other settings. Thirdly, this research only included responses from school administrators and did not include perspectives from educators or parents/guardians.

Finally, the scope of the study was defined as Illinois school administrators, in one district, who have had experiences with challenges and barriers to working with foster youth. The criteria for inclusion was a minimum of 1 year of experience in education and a minimum of 1 year in the current administrative position. These criteria were based on research that described either instructional or managerial mindsets of those in administrative positions for fewer than 4 years or over 10 years. Researchers have demonstrated that assistant principals who have been at their present position for less than 4 years tend to support activities that are more instructional in nature, such as organizing school-based curriculum development and matching professional development activities to school needs (Sun & Shoho, 2017). This instructional mind frame is important since educators note the lack of services and support within their curriculums in meeting the needs of foster children (Zetlin et al, 2012). Assistant principals with 10 or more years in the position tend to choose activities that are more

managerial in nature, such as orientation of staff, work assignments, and performance review (Sun & Shoho, 2017). The mind set of evaluating, managing, and assessing people is important considering that poor communication amongst child welfare persons and the lack of understanding of professional roles inhibits the services and support to foster students (Blackman et al., 2016; Noonan et al., 2012; Zetlin et al., 2012).

### **Significance of the Study**

My goal was to understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by public school administrators in educating foster youth. This research will fill a gap in the understanding of experiences of educators, principals, and assistant principals in educating elementary foster students, and understanding how their educational needs may be different from that of the general population of students. This research may aid in educational and child welfare practices, policies, and strategies that may positively contribute to and support the educational and child welfare environments.

By exploring the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of school administrators, my research can be used to inform practice for those within the child welfare and educational arenas. In identifying the academic needs of foster children, an educational service plan unique to this population can be created. In addition, the data derived from my research can help promote a better understanding of the environmental and demographic components that have led up to a foster child's educational enrollment and status.

### **Summary and Transition**

Early maltreatment prevention efforts and interventions provided by nongovernmental agencies starting in the 1960s became the catalyst for future governmental intervention. These interventions involved stricter policies, reporting systems, and funding. States use federal guidelines to enforce procedures and policies specific to the needs of maltreated children.

Children within the purview of the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) have unique needs to their behavioral, physical, social, emotional, and educational health. Meeting these needs require a child welfare team composed of multiple professionals working efficiently within the federal and state mandates and collaborating effectively to solve the challenges associated with caring for foster children.

Members of the child welfare team, particularly those within the educational arena, experience unique challenges in educating foster youth. The challenges of the educators are documented within the research, but the experiences of the school administrators are not. The experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary principals and assistant principals are needed for accurate curriculum design, support services and behavioral management plans to be developed that support the unique needs of the foster youth. Chapter 2 of this study includes a review of the literature associated with the foster care framework and how this framework contributes to the unique needs and experiences of foster youth. Chapter 3 will include information on the method and approach I used in this study to focus on understanding school administrators' experiences in educating elementary foster youth.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators in one school district in Illinois who work with foster youth. In this literature review, I describe the multiple components of the foster system, along with the challenges experienced by those within the system. I used ecological theory to approach and understand the academic needs of foster youth and in understanding the challenges faced by school districts in educational delivery. Educating elementary foster youth includes specific academic and learning challenges that differ from those found in educating nonfoster youth.

I conducted the primary literature search using the following EBSCOhost databases: PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, ERIC and SocINDEX. The primary search keywords and key phrases included: *foster children, foster youth, educational outcomes*. Combinations of keywords used included *foster children and educational outcomes, educational experiences of youth in foster care, educational outcomes for foster children, elementary students and foster care, cross system collaboration in child welfare, teaching foster children, educational needs of foster children, and educating at-risk populations*.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical basis for this study was the ecological theory. This theory indicates that the setting in which an individual is immersed within impacts development of that individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Rosa & Tudge, 2013). The environmental systems described within this theory can negate or support individual development across multiple domains, including the educational arena.

Ecological theory served as a basis for examining the relationship between educational achievements, school administrator knowledge, and educator challenges pertaining to foster children. The ecological perspective highlights the importance of the relational connectedness (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The microsystem involved specifically pertains to the home environment and the school environment that the foster child is directly immersed in and depends on for development. According to one study, educators reported that foster caregivers made minimal to no financial contribution to buy lunch or school supplies for the foster child (Zetlin et al., 2012). Furthermore, the educators reported that foster students attended school with poor hygiene and inadequate clothing. Finally, educators indicated that caregivers did not attend parent-teacher or IEP conferences and seemed concerned only with home rather than school behavior (Zetlin et al., 2012). Weak collaboration among the school, teacher, caregiver, and child welfare representative delay services and support to foster youth (Zetlin et al, 2012). Poor communication between educators and child welfare workers leaves teachers uninformed about behavioral and emotional challenges and unsupported on how best to meet the foster student's needs (Zetlin et al., 2012).

The school and the home function as the mesosystem level in impacting the development of the foster students. A disconnect in communication between and among the entities was denoted. Blackman et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of collaborative efforts among foster parents, special education administrators, as well as building principals and other administrators. However, the authors noted the poor advocacy building level administrators had for foster students entering their buildings. In

addition to administrative struggles, general education teachers reported that no information was given to them regarding the foster status, background information, and contact information (Zetlin et al, 2012). Furthermore, 60% of educators indicated that there was no additional assistance provided to them to address the unique needs of the foster students (Zetlin et al., 2012).

The integration of and the importance of the various systems denoted in the ecological theory is further supported by Tyre (2012), who examined the effectiveness of the Educational Success Program (ESP). Foster youth enrolled in the ESP were assigned a teacher and a tutor to offer additional academic support, coordinate needed educational services, and advocate for foster youth's need. Foster youth in the ESP passed 93% of their enrolled courses while simultaneously obtaining a 2.5 or higher grade point average (Tyre, 2012). Tyre noted that participants increased reading comprehension and oral fluency. The educational environment that the foster youth was directly involved in provided positive outcomes at the most proximal microsystemic level.

Tyre (2012) also noted the financial status of the school district, which represents the macrosystem level, as a limitation. Despite the positive outcomes of the ESP program, individually assigned teachers and tutors may not be within the financial purview of the school or district (Tyre, 2012). Although school districts and the political decisions made are not directly involved in the day-to-day development of the foster youth, the impact these entities make from a broader sense impacts youth development. Tyre recommended that such assignments be naturally embedded into the already existing curriculums.

Protective custody may be suggested for children involved in abusive events. Children within the foster care system offer a unique set of needs. School personnel are challenged to meet the diverse and complex needs of the foster children within their classrooms. Ecological theory may provide a theoretical underpinning for the experiences of school administrators in instructing foster students and for developing proactive recommendations in meeting the unique educational needs of this vulnerable population

### **The Foster Care System Framework**

The foster system is complicated. When less than ideal familial situations negatively impact the health of a child, an intervention from a child welfare team seeks to negate further trauma. The Department of Children and Family Services (Illinois DCFS, 2017) seeks to serve traumatized children in finding safety, health, and stability through general and specific interventions and services. Policies and procedures ensure day care facilities, foster homes, and additional programmatic settings are providing safe environments for traumatized children to heal, grow, and progress. Programs focusing on family preservation, sibling connectedness, grandparent education, foster care, adoption, and independence help protect the state's most vulnerable population (Illinois DCFS, 2017).

When harm is proven and health is jeopardized, children may be taken into DCFS protective custody and placed within a foster care setting. This out-of-home care is provided by the state and involves the temporary positioning of the child with a relative (kinship) or nonrelative that have been licensed or approved by the State to render shelter and care to the child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). This

placement can be in a traditional home, group home, residential care facility, emergency shelter, or supervised independent living setting (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Child welfare is the responsibility of a variety of agencies and individuals. Caring for the needs of an estimated 430,000 foster children requires a network of professionals working collaboratively (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Upon entering foster care, over 70% of children were placed in either a relative or nonrelative foster home (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Over 50% of children in foster care have a goal of reunification with parents or primary caretakers (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Monitoring the foster home placement and goal progression/digression requires collaboration between child welfare team members.

To support and enforce child protection laws, a child welfare team composed of organizations and professional personnel ensure the safety and health of youth. At the federal level, the Administration for Children and Families, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, offers programming that promotes the social and economic well-being of families, children, individuals, and communities (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2019). The Children's Bureau implements child and family legislation while working with state and local welfare agencies to develop, maintain, and enhance programs focusing on abuse prevention and protection, family reunification, and placement permanency (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). In addition, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families (ACYF) manages the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System



(NCANDS), a comprehensive database that illustrates national and state statistics about child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018).

Utilizing federal infrastructure and guidance, states develop specific programs and services to ensure the protection and progression of its young residents. DCFS seeks to protect children, strengthen families, and promote permanency through prevention/intervention services, educational programming, and policy reform (Illinois DCFS, 2019). Utilizing a system of care that includes health care, education, nutrition, human attachment, social engagement, data review/integration, and appropriate financial reimbursement, Illinois DCFS supports communities in producing positive outcomes for its children and families (Illinois DCFS, 2019).

Professional personnel include individuals who come in direct contact with children as mandated by his/her occupation, such as educators, medical personnel, and legal/law enforcement personnel. (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018). Professional personnel are responsible for 64.9% of referral reports of alleged child abuse and neglect to child protective services, with the highest referring body being education personnel, followed by legal and law enforcement personnel and social services personnel (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2018).

## **Stakeholders**

Each member of the child welfare team has a contributing role in the overall protection of children. By law, individuals working within the education, health care, law enforcement, and social work fields are mandated reporters who are required to report suspected cases of child abuse and neglect (Illinois DCFS, 2017; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Mandated reporters report the facts and circumstances that lead to the abuse suspicions, but do not have to provide proof of the abuse or neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Reporters' identities are held in confidences, unless state jurisdictions mandate release under special circumstances (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Clergy, who may play a role in the familial and child welfare support structure, must immediately report suspicions to DCFS if reasonable cause of suspicion exists, but are excluded from disclosure if confessions or admissions are made while in professional character as dictated by rules of practice of the religious body (Code of Civil Procedure, 325 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. § 5/4; Code of Civil Procedure, 735 Ill. Comp. Stat. Ann. § 5/8-803).

The extensive infrastructure required to address the needs of foster children relies on multiple stakeholders from home, school, and social services agencies to work together. Policies and practices, formal procedures, and shared accountability and responsibility of schools, caregivers, and agencies are important to educational success of foster youth (Zetlin et al., 2004; Berridge, 2017). The Illinois DCFS has a 2600-member staff that has licensed over 11,000 day care facilities, reunited 21,000 children with their birth families, found permanent homes for 15,000 children, managed 220,000 Child

Abuse and Neglect Hotline calls, and serviced 60,000 families in the last decade (Illinois DCFS, 2017). Each member of the child welfare team regardless of the setting plays a role in the overall well-being of the foster child. Furthermore, each team member must understand one another's role as it relates to the academic experience of foster youth. Educators, foster parents, and biological parents are deemed the highest in perceived support (Garstka et al., 2014).

Educators and child welfare staff may perceive individual barriers differently. Educators deemed that court orders, inadequate information sharing between agencies, and lack of specific student information are significant barriers to educational success (Garstka et al., 2014). Conversely, child welfare members perceived transfer credits between schools and lack of youth participation in educational planning as more significant barriers (Garstka et al., 2014). Educators perceived state child welfare practices as a significant system barrier to foster youth's academic success, while child welfare members perceived school district policies and procedures as a significant barrier (Garstka et al., 2014). Court personnel denoted child welfare processes as a significant barrier to positive educational outcomes (Garstka et al., 2014).

Knowledge of and implementation of educational policies, ineffective cross-system communication, and uncertain stakeholder roles are perceived as barriers by stakeholders including caseworkers, teachers, school counselors, and foster parents (Noonan et al., 2012). In addition, these barriers to the education and child welfare systems extend into the behavioral health system, as educators and child welfare workers try to manage behavioral and mental health issues with foster (Noonan et al., 2012).

Success or failure of the role, as well as an understanding of barriers can contribute to or negate the educational health of the foster child and the overall efficacy of the child welfare unit.

### ***Role of the School System***

Within the educational setting, students encounter many different professionals who collaborate with one another to ensure progression. Of the approximately 437,000 children in foster care in 2016, nearly 275,000 were in elementary and secondary school age ranges (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). With over half of youth in care in school age range and with children spending the majority of their time at school, schools are an obvious and integral part of the child welfare plan. Blackman et al. (2016) asserted the vital role school administrators, which includes principals and assistant principals, play in developing and maintaining effective services and in hiring qualified staff to support student mental health needs. Furthermore, with the rising cost of services and the competition for public funding, health care providers are seeking creative ways to deliver services to at-risk youth, which includes using schools as a viable vehicle for service delivery (Lynch et al., 2017).

Even though schools play an important role in the lives of foster children, the educational gap proves that there is still challenges and accountability issues that need to be addressed by districts and governing bodies. California enacted the Local Control Funding Formula and Accountability Plans which hold the education system accountable for underperforming vulnerable populations, which includes foster children (Foulk & Esposito, 2016). This accountability, however, is present in only a small percentage of

school districts and is thought to be derived from the lack of education and knowledge school districts have regarding the unique needs of foster children (Huff, 2015).

Depending on the unique situation of the foster student, schools may not have direct access to comprehensive background information or to removal circumstances which may inhibit timely and effective information (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

### ***Role of the Foster Parent***

Foster parents provide direct care to children who have been neglected and/or abused. In doing so, foster parents are obligated to engage in behaviors and communications that promote the best interests of the foster child. Academically, the role of the foster parent is particularly important, especially when foster parents engage in educationally supportive behaviors at home. Foster children whose foster parents engaged them in a home tutor training program, scored higher in sentence comprehension, reading composition, and math comprehension testing than foster children who did not obtain tutoring from their foster caregivers (Flynn et al., 2012). In addition, foster parents are expected to provide a safe nurturing environment, to support the developmental and emotional needs of the child, to promote healthy attachments, and to collaborate with all child welfare team members (Foster Parent Law, 20 ILCS 520). Furthermore, foster parents must understand the sensitivity of culture, ethnicity, religion, and biological connections of the foster children placed with them (Foster Parent Law, 20 ILCS 520).

To ensure that all needs of the foster child are met, foster parents must collaborate directly with the child welfare agency. This interaction directly impacts the ability of the

foster parent to deliver care to this vulnerable population. Foster parents acknowledge an overwhelmed child welfare system and appreciate emotionally supportive workers (Geiger et al., 2017). Flexibility, responsiveness, and communication are expected and vital components of the foster parent/ welfare agency relationship (Geiger et al., 2017). The unique demands foster parents have in navigating the needs of children in their care contributes to increased levels of stress, placement instability, and career attrition (McKeogh et al., 2017). Understanding the perspectives, struggles, and role of foster parents is important to ensure that foster children receive an all-encompassing treatment plan which includes educational stability.

### ***Role of the Child Welfare Agency***

Although the child welfare agency primarily oversees and coordinates all aspects of a foster child's recovery plan, challenges occur that negate the agency's ability to ensure service delivery. While working with foster parents, agency workers face negativism and lethargic parent responses because of the historical experiences foster parents have had with the child welfare system (Brown et al., 2016). Recognizing the problem, building trust, and recognizing/ rewarding roles are helpful mechanisms to develop and maintain a collaborative environment amongst agency workers and foster parents (Brown et al., 2016).

### ***Role of the Legal System***

The ability of schools and districts to ensure positive educational outcomes requires child welfare agencies and educational agencies at the state and local levels to collaborate to ensure that laws and provisions are developed and followed to promote

educational stability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Federal laws and provisions provide the structure for child welfare practices and give guidance to states during the implementation and maintenance of their own child welfare systems. These laws and provisions allow disclosure of educational information without parental consent, ensures privacy protection for families, and allows foster children to stay in their school of origin or immediately enrolled in a new school (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

An amendment to the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) known as the Uninterrupted Scholars Act, permits educational institutions to disclose the educational records of foster children to welfare agencies without parental or student consent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). This allows more efficient data sharing to occur while simultaneously protecting the privacy of foster children and their families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) mandates local educational agencies (LEAs) and state educational agencies (SEAs) to work with child welfare agencies in the decision-making process to ensure educational stability for foster students (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). This provision emphasizes the importance of keeping foster children in their school of origin or ensuring an expeditious enrollment in another school if the school of origin is not in the student's best interest (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Federal laws and provisions help states establish and maintain a welfare system that meets the needs of the children within the system. The John H. Chafee Foster Care

Independence Program (CFCIP), a section of the Social Security Act, provides funding to states as long as they maintain a data collection system that focuses on foster youths' financial self-sufficiency, educational attainment, adult connections, homelessness, high-risk behaviors and health insurance access as they age out of the welfare system (National Youth in Transition Database, 2012). States who do not comply with the CFCIP law of data reporting will see a one to five percent decrease in state funding (National Youth in Transition Database, 2012). In the State of Illinois, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) issued a bulletin to help state districts comply with ESSA requirements. The section of the School Code suggests districts review transportation plans of foster children who may or may not move from their school of origin and appoint a school liaison to facilitate school enrollment and transfer process of foster students (School Code, 105 ILCS 5/10-20.59). Federal and state laws, such as Title IV-E of the Social Security Act and Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, although well intended in protecting educational confidentiality and records, often contradict one another leaving districts and states to interpret the requirements differently (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010).

### **Complications of the Foster System Framework**

Despite federal and state laws and provisions ensuring educational stability, foster children experience educational gaps and delays when compared to their nonfoster peers. Incomplete education records and lethargic access to educational records are missed opportunities for educational stability in foster youth who move from placement to placement (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010). School and agency



collaboration in sharing confidential information on foster youth and obtaining timely information is a source of confliction as law interpretation and differences in training, agency rules, and practice norm make it difficult to formulate a plan for educational success (Noonan et al., 2012; Zetlin et al., 2010).

Multiple placements promote difficulties with timely enrollment and credit transfers as the foster child moves from school to school (Levy et al, 2014). Because of multiple moves, poor coordination amongst school systems and agencies, and lack of educational funding, foster students must retake courses, be delayed in moving to a least restrictive environment as their Individualize Education Program (IEP) states and be delayed in the overall educational success (Levy et al., 2014; Stone et al., 2006). Stakeholders within the child welfare, educational, and legal domains, denote that multiple placements, truancy or other behavioral issues, and lack of appropriate placement resources are significant barriers to educational success (Garstka et al., 2014). However, long term foster care is not a detriment to the child's functioning, as the environment is often healthier than what is provided by the primary family who may not have resolved the issues that necessitated the original removal (Zimmerman, 1982).

### **Unique Needs of Foster Youth**

Foster children are more likely to experience behavioral, mental, relational, physical issues than their nonfoster peers. Most foster children have varying degrees of behavioral, emotional, discipline, and social issues, which are often also evident in the educational environment (Blome, 1997; Vanderfaeillie et al, 2012). Along with lower educational attainment, foster children have increased incidence of chronic health

problems, regardless of the time spent in substitute care (Zimmerman, 1982). These challenges have implications that span over multiple domains, including the education setting. Because of the foster child's traumatic experiences, specific challenges occur that require stakeholders to implore special services to address the unique needs of this vulnerable population.

### **Behavioral and Mental Health Needs**

Children in care of the child welfare agency have different behavioral and mental health needs when compared to those not under agency care. Children who experience multiple placements from 0-72 months of age have a higher risk of mental health disorders than their nonfoster peers (Hillen & Gafson, 2015). Particularly, children who experience multiple types of maltreatment preplacement and who entered care after the age of 6 months have significant association with mental health disorders (Hillen & Gafson, 2015).

Foster children have also increased rates of mental issues along with an increased need for behavioral services and psychotropic medication usage (Scozzaro & Janikowske, 2015). Foster children who are treated with antipsychotic medication are more likely to receive psychosocial intervention referrals than nonfoster peers (Stephen et al., 2016). However, lack of follow-through in obtaining interventions are common (Stephen et al., 2016). Brain activation levels between foster children and non-maltreated children denote a change in neural activity of foster children suggesting that early trauma exposure impacts inhibitory responses to stimuli, particularly in go/no go tasks (Bruce et al., 2013). This inhibitory response impacts the child's ability to engage in appropriate

executive functioning skills and cognitive control needed to function within an educational environment.

Furthermore, children who experience child abuse are more likely to experience neural shifts because of decreased cortical thickness which increases the risk of internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems (Busso et al., 2017). In an educational setting, this increase risk of internalizing behaviors (such as adapting to change, anxiety, developmental concerns, attachment issues, sexual behavior, and self-esteem) and externalizing behaviors (such as delinquency, deviance, acting out, aggression, and hyperactivity) affects the foster child's ability to function within the traditional school setting (Ogg et al., 2015). When compared to same-age peers, foster children often have lower adaptive skills, thus contributing to these externalizing and internalizing behaviors (Ogg et al., 2015). Foster students exhibiting behaviors that inhibit educational progression require additional support services than their non foster peers. The support services should focus on social skills, mental health, behavioral management, extracurricular activities, and a continuum of care plan (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017).

### **Relational Needs**

Foster children experience a disruption in the family functioning and in relational strength. Children placed in kinship care were more likely to be in guardianship care, whereas children in non-kinship care were more likely to achieve permanency through adoption (Winokur et al., 2014). The consistent presence of a caring adult, no matter through kinship, nonkinship, educational, or social means impacts school progression.

Foster youth note that a caring adult not only helps with determination and motivation to want to succeed, but also with the tangible processes important to school progression, such as keeping transcript copies, monitoring grades, and ensuring accountability (Levy et al., 2014). Although these caring adults can be located within the child welfare, educational, or paraprofessionals settings, the most frequently reported model in former foster youth attending 4 year universities were teachers (Merdingner et al., 2005)

Foster children experience unique situations, living environments, and experiences of loss that set them apart from their nonfoster peers. Children in foster care often experience a psychological and physical disconnect from familial relationships, further exacerbated by placement changes (Mitchell, 2016). Movement within the foster system, coupled with the dissolution of significant relationships, also often affects foster children's ability to make meaning of loss and family transactions (Mitchell, 2016).

### **Physical Needs**

Aside from behavioral, mental, and relational challenges, children who have been abused and/or neglected may also experience physical trauma. All violence experienced in childhood negatively impacts educational performance (Fry et al., 2018). Those who have experienced sexual violence scored 25 percentile points lower than their peers in standardized test scores while physical violence, emotional violence, witnessing parental violence and bullying contribute to poor test scores, school absences, class remediation, school drop-out (Fry et al., 2018). Children in foster care are more likely to be in fair or poor health, have activity limitations, have asthma, and be obese when compared to nonfoster peers (Turney & Wildeman, 2016).

## **Emotional Needs**

The emotional consequences of being involved in the child welfare system can take a toll on educational success. The events that brought the foster child into care, the physical placement within a new setting, and the functioning within the protective systems can be emotionally challenging on top of the demands required to learn and perform in school (Clemens et al, 2017). Emotional consequences of foster placement is underestimated and misunderstood, as feelings of marginalization and isolation interrupt all aspects of life, not just education (Clemens et al., 2017). In addition, outside responsibilities, such as caring for younger family members, thwarting homelessness, and finding food compete with school responsibilities (Clemens et al, 2017).

Coping with childhood maltreatment and placement instability can effect foster children well into adulthood. Exposure to negative childhood events increases the risks of depression and suicide, with additional development of diseases, such as heart and lung disease and alcoholism (Williams-Mbengue, 2014). Foster care alumni have poor mental outcomes compared to the general populations experiencing increased rates of panic disorders, depressive episodes, social phobias, and anxiety (Casey Family Programs, 2004, Turney & Wildeman, 2016). Poor emotional health is further exacerbated if the biological parents of the foster children also suffer from emotional instability (Reid, 2015).

## **Educational Experiences of Foster Youth**

Foster children have complex and unique needs that impact their experiences within the educational domain. These experiences can either advance or negate the

academic progression of a foster child. The educational outcomes of foster children are influenced by barriers within the foster care system and have direct implications on school and child welfare systems.

### **Educational Outcomes**

Foster children experience significant educational challenges and associated educational failure at all educational levels. Foster children are at greater risk for multiple negative outcomes, including those outcomes pertaining to educational performance and attainment (Kirk et al., 2012). Increased high school drop-out rates, decreased high school graduation rates, decreased GED completion, and increased educational disruption because of mobility contribute to educational failure of foster children (Blome, 1997; Legal Center for Foster Care Education, 2014). Furthermore, foster youth living with foster families receive less financial assistance and lower caregiver support for educational experiences than youth living with at least one parent or guardian (Blome, 1997).

Foster youth at the elementary level face challenges that establish a foundation of educational failure. Foster children have poor affective and cognitive engagement, thus increasing their risk of risky behavior and decreasing academic competence (Pears et al., 2013). Weak academic backgrounds, failure to meet grade level academic expectations, limited access to books, and difficulty transitioning to classroom routines contribute to negative education outcomes of foster children (Jackson & Martin, 1998; Zetlin et al., 2012). Foster youth are 2.5-3.5 times more likely to receive special education services than nonfoster peers (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

Children who experience maltreatment have lower intelligence quotient (IQ) score, in addition to lower verbal comprehension, vocabulary comprehension, and processing speed (Viezel et al., 2015). Learning disabilities, developmental delays, and speech problems are more evident in foster children when compared to peers in other living arrangements (Turney & Wildeman, 2016).

As the foster child ages, educational challenges continue to occur. Foster children ages 17-18 are two times more likely to have out of school suspensions and three times more likely to be expelled. They also have an average reading capacity at the 7th grade level (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). In addition, foster youth have a lower high school graduation rate and a significantly lower percentage of college attendance when compared to their non foster peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Contrarily, foster youth who harnessed strong adult relationships with mentors, had structured transitions, and had access to post-secondary information and opportunities, had more positive educational and over-all well-being outcomes (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

Foster children may develop additional disadvantages as they move into adulthood. Household poverty early in childhood correlates with increased risk for out-of-home care (OHC), which includes foster families or residential care (Brannstrom et al., 2017). Children experiencing OHC have lower educational attainment and higher rates of social assistance and unemployment into adulthood than their same-age peers (Brannstrom et al., 2017). When children are placed in out-of-home settings because of

maltreatment, this placement may include kinship care. Kinship care involves placement of the child with adults who have a kinship bond with a child through biological, tribe, clan, or step means (Winokur et al., 2014). Children placed in kinship care have decreased behavioral problems, fewer mental health disorders, and decreased placement disruption when compared to non-kinship placements (Winokur et al., 2014). Other research denotes that when social workers announce permanency in a placement, foster children performed better in math, reading, and vocabulary than if the placement was temporary, and when reunification with the birth family was announced, poor educational outcomes occurred (see Aldgate et al., 1992; Choices et al., 2001). Although the authors recognize the impact kinship care has, it denotes that kinship placement outcomes are hard to detect because care arrangements are made in private outside of the purview of child welfare agencies (Winokur et al., 2014).

### **Educational Barriers and the Foster Care System**

The Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (2014) assert that school personnel were one of the higher groups for reporting suspected child abuse. However, both school administrators and teachers describe the difficulties in navigating the child welfare world and its processes. Foster children are more likely to need special education services than their nonfoster peers (Goerge et al., 1992; Palladino & Haar, 2011;). However, the number of foster children actually receiving special education services was much higher than what was identified by DCFS systems, suggesting that children in need are going unserved and unnoticed and that important administrative systems and databases are not accurately reflecting reality (Goerge et al., 1992). However, although



they recognize foster parents and caseworkers as important professionals in a foster student's educational success, special education administrators admit to deliberately excluding foster parents, caseworkers, and/or building principals if they perceived them to be incompetent (Palladino & Haar, 2011).

From an educator perspective, Schols et al. (2013) reported a gap in knowledge in educators regarding the signs of child abuse and the reporting procedures for alleged abuse. Additionally, teachers admit difficulty in speaking with children regarding alleged abusive events. Despite the day-to-day interaction between teacher and foster student, teachers felt unprepared to communicate with the foster youth regarding their abusive circumstances (Schols et al., 2013). Poor foster caregiver involvement, absent or reduced background information, and minimal school support are challenges faced by educators of foster students (Zetlin et al., 2012). Teachers noted the importance of communication amongst school personnel and all local support agencies that are directly or superficially involved in the development of foster students. Educational training of educators and caregivers are important supportive tools for individuals who work with or instruct foster youth.

Despite prescriptive processes meant to promote academic strength, school systems experience many challenges when delivering on the promise of education. School personnel generally find out a student is in foster care through multiple ways, including self-disclosure during conversation or assignments or they do not find out at all of the foster status (Levy et al., 2014; Moyer, 2018; Zetlin et al., 2012). Foster students may be forced to divulge their foster care status to educators to support why they are not

able to perform the expected activities, such as sport participation, after-school activities, and school social functions (Levy et al., 2014). In smaller communities, the disclosure of foster status was outside of the foster student's control because of the naturally existing environment of familiarity amongst community members (Levy et al., 2014). This confirms the lack of a formal and structural process of recognition, thus reducing the school's effectiveness in responding to foster students' academic needs (Zetlin et al., 2012).

The attitudes and perceptions of school personnel and peers can hinder or promote education growth in foster youth. Administrators' priority of privacy over student care reduces the teacher's ability to tailor the educational experience around the foster student's needs and experiences (Moyer, 2018). Teachers may not understand a foster child's social, emotional, and behavioral struggles and how such struggles impact the classroom learning and success (Berridge, 2017). Foster youth report school personnel would judge their abilities and skills based on their past experiences with teaching foster youth (Levy et al., 2014). This pre-judgement prevented progression because the services and instructions did not equate to the actual performance level of the foster student (Levy et al., 2014). Contrarily, some foster youth reported their foster status provided positive benefits as they received extra assistance and attention from educators (Levy et al., 2014). For some foster children, the fear of social stigma negates their desire to engage in school (Clemens et al., 2017).

The challenges school districts face is further exacerbated when educating at-risk youth. The laws and child welfare procedures, established to help foster children, may

indeed hinder progression across many domains. Linking state-wide child welfare data and state-wide educational data denote the large gap in educational attainment and academic achievement (Clemens & Tis, 2016; Texas Education Agency, 2013). Court dates, therapy, and foster-related services mean frequent absenteeism from school and lost class time (Levy et al., 2014). Extra-curricular activities, such as sports and dances, are missed even when appointments may be scheduled after school to reduce missed class time (Levy et al., 2014). Furthermore, participation is withdrawn because of disciplinary issues or because of disagreements as to who was the responsible party to pay for such school-related needs (Levy et al., 2014). The lack of participation in these activities in addition to placement/ school changes prevent the foster child from feeling like a “regular kid” and from establishing healthy social relationships (Levy et al., 2014).

Although the foster system is meant to protect and guide those children who’ve experience abuse and/or neglect, foster children experience barriers within the system that inhibit educational stability and progression. Foster children experience high rates of school mobility because of placement instability. This mobility hinders the educational progression of the foster child and negates the school’s ability to implement appropriate services. Movement from school to school hinders the ability of foster children to participate in and benefit from existing universal school programming for at-risk students which typically relies on consistent attendance over a long period of time (Lynch et al., 2017). Shorter, more specific programs, such as the Kids in Transition to School (KITS), are more likely to promote emotional, behavioral, and school readiness benefits for foster children (Lynch et al., 2017).

When child welfare agencies are determining placement, the quality and the permanency of such placement impacts the educational experience of the foster youth. Temporary placements, such as those created by foster homes, and permanent placements, such as those created by guardianship/adoption, are important to child growth. The adopted youth who had Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) pre-adoption had their disability identification changed post adoption to better reflect the additional testing and assessment demanded by the adoptive parents (Hill & Foster, 2015). Additionally, increased access to the general education setting, increased peer and community connections, and better IEP quality and tone were evident post adoption (Hill & Foster, 2015). Although the authors denoted the importance of connectedness, permanency, and support, its findings did not address children under the age of 13. The child welfare system seeks to ensure that children are functioning in an environment that is safe, stimulating, and healthy and careful consideration of placement status helps ensure this environment.

Additional systemic barriers jeopardize the educational strength of foster children. Poor interagency coordination between school, child welfare agency, and the foster home along with inappropriate school services contributes to foster children's continued experience of different and often negative educational outcomes compared to their nonfoster peers (Weinberg et al., 2014; Zetlin et al., 2012). Furthermore, there is an absence of a consistent liaison knowledgeable enough about the child to advocate for educational needs (Weinberg et al., 2014). The lack of permanency, home stability, and relational strength inhibits the foster child from moving forward. A positive school

experienced created by solid caregiver, agency and school communication, the promotion of regular school attendance, the availability of preventative behavioral interventions, and strong special education services can counterbalance the negative experience of foster children (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Hill and Koester (2015) denoted the importance of foster children obtaining permanency to change educational outcomes. Professions, such as teachers and social workers, are directly positioned to help identify ways that support permanent connections with those who can help foster children attain educational success (Hill & Koester, 2015). Although the authors note the importance of educators and school social workers in helping young foster adults achieve permanency and academic success, they focused on only the perspectives of adoptive parents with no attention to the views of school personnel.

Although researchers have noted that foster children experience lower academic achievement than nonfoster peers, some foster children do attain educational success. Children in foster care experience mobility of home placement and school placement, thus creating instability that potentially hinders movement forward. However, foster home quality can help thwart the negative impact of mobility and can help promote academic success. Foster homes that provide routine and structure, promote core values, and mandate giving one's best supports school achievement (Skilbred et al., 2017). In addition, foster homes that promote inclusivity and feelings of belonging contribute to academic strength (Skilbred et al., 2017). Highly educated foster parents were more likely to offer intensive academic interventions and to offer informed advice on pursuing higher education, suggesting that foster parent educational background should be a factor

in placement selection (Jackson & Martin, 1998). Caregiver and youth educational aspirations, female gender, time with current caregiver, and positive mental health are associated with positive educational outcomes, while neglect, special education needs, male gender, minority status, and soft drug use are associated with poorer educational outcomes (Tessier et al., 2018). Although the authors point to such factors that help or hinder educational success, the longitudinal analysis only looked at ages 11-17 (Tessier et al., 2018).

### **Elementary Education and Foster Care System**

The education system seeks to instill knowledge and to promote skills needed for youth to grow into functional and successful members of society. Youth who experience multiple negative childhood stresses may become involved within the foster system. The foster system framework involves various stakeholders that function within and collaborate with multiple systems in order to promote educational success of foster children. Because of the unique needs of foster children, systemic and educational barriers challenge the educational experiences of foster youth, thus impacting educational outcomes at all levels, particularly students within the elementary level.

Depending on school systems and state regulations, general elementary education involves grades kindergarten through grade eight (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Children in foster care experience multiple school moves within the first two years of schooling, which can negatively impact educational learning, particularly those that entered kindergarten with poor learning skills (Pears et al., 2015). Kindergarten and 1st grade foster students who were maltreated showed lower academic competence

and decreased social-emotional competence (including prosocial behavior, emotional regulation, and behavior regulation) than their non foster peers (Pears et al, 2010).

For this study, I sought to target a specific school district and county in the State of Illinois. The county that serves the school district I sought to target has higher rates of child abuse and neglect per capita than other counties in Illinois (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2014). Within the targeted school district, 66.2% of students (ages 3-17) come from low income households, receive public aid, live in substitute care (including homeless, migrant, runaway, Head Start or foster child classifications), or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches compared to a State average of 49% (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). Nationally, 23% of fourth-graders and eighth-graders who were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch were chronically absent compared to 15% of non-eligible-peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Chronically absent, by Illinois law, is defined as missing ten percent of school days within an academic year with or without a valid excuse (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). Chronic absenteeism predicts poor reading achievement by first grade and overall adversely affects academic success (Chang & Romero, 2008).

### **Summary and Transition**

Higher rates of absenteeism occur among children in foster care than in community controls, particularly those students in unstable foster placements (Zorc et al., 2013). The State of Illinois is in the top five states with the largest number of homeless students enrolled in public elementary and secondary school (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2014). This becomes relevant as studies show the correlation between income level/inequalities and child maltreatment (Eckenrode et al., 2017).

Ecological theory served as a framework for this study. The foster care system framework involves multiple stakeholders that play a role in the stability of foster youth. Although well-intended, the system has complications that negate such stability. The unique behavioral, mental, relational, physical, and emotional needs of foster youth impact the educational outcomes of foster youth. Chapter 3 of this study will include the research methodology used in understanding the school administrators' experiences in working with elementary foster youth.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois. I used electronically delivered interview questions to focus on administrators' role in curriculum design, support services, and ability to address behavioral issues in the school setting. This chapter will include the research design and rationale and a description of the methodology and strategies I used to ensure trustworthiness and ethical standards.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The central research question for this study focused on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois. A qualitative research design highlights the multidimensional characteristics of human experiences and the contexts in which these experiences occur (Goussinsky et al., 2011). The case study approach is used to investigate complex phenomena related to an individual, program, or situation and offers a depth and richness of data to better understand, explain, or describe the phenomenon present (Alpi & Evans, 2019). In this study, I used a qualitative case study design to explore the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of school administrators and teachers who work to support foster students. I triangulated the data from administrators and teachers and explored data from school district reports to understand the case of this district.

The case study approach was most appropriate because of this bounded case of the district (see Yin, 2013) with clear boundaries for inclusion and exclusion. As discussed in Chapter 1, 62% of students in this district are raised in low-income-households, receive public aid, live in substitute care, or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches (Illinois State Board of Education, 2018). These conditions contribute to many challenges for parents, families, and the school system. Viewing this district as a case was important to understanding the perceptions and experiences of these school personnel. Interview questions sent through email assessed the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of supporting foster students who have suffered abuse or maltreatment.

In addition, other forms of qualitative research were considered but not appropriate here. Phenomenology (see Rahman, 2017) is focused on the daily lived experiences of individuals and was not a fit for my research question. Ethnography (see Sangasubana, 2011) is mainly employed for understanding culture and cultural practices. This was not the focus of my research. A case study approach was a good fit for understanding perceptions and experiences of personnel in one district in Illinois.

Skilbred et al. (2017) utilized the case study approach in interviewing foster parents and students to discover the feeling of belonging in the foster home, the core values of the foster home, and the order and structure of the foster home were critical in achieving higher academic success as young adults. Meetoo et al. (2020) examined foster carers' roles in the educational development of foster children and discovered foster carers emphasized emotional security first in foster placements over the need for

learning and education. Spath and Pine (2004) emphasized the benefits of a case study approach in facilitating communication and collaboration amongst stakeholders, in providing important information for decision-making, and in contributing to successful programmatic evaluations. Furthermore, Cameron et al. (2020) emphasized the cruciality of social workers and caregivers to understand the role education plays in child development and to understand their role as educators themselves. Understanding the roles of social workers, caregivers, and educators is particularly important since research supports poor inter-agency collaboration and unsupported or absent programmatic services negatively contribute to the educational outcomes of foster youth (Weinberg et al., 2014; Zetlin et al., 2012). Weinberg et al. (2009) used a case study approach to examine the interagency collaboration between child welfare agencies, educational agencies, and public agencies and its impact on the educational outcomes of foster children. The results concurred with Pirttimaa and Valivaara's (2017) case study stating interagency communication and the collaboration and cooperation of team members were critical in order for educational barriers to be minimized and for the efficacy of school-based interventional program to be successful for foster children (Weinberg et al., 2009). Researchers use the case study approach to delve deeper into the *why's* and *how's* of the educational components school administrators must manage when teaching foster youth (Westgren & Zering, 1998).

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher must embody and commit to intellectual honesty and personal responsibility for their actions. The role of a qualitative researcher involves thematising,

designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying, and reporting in such way that barriers are minimize or unified (Fink, 2000). Reflective engagement, interpretive thinking, minimizing personal assumptions, and disclosing personal biases allow the researcher to more accurately assess the topic being studied (Clark & Veale, 2018).

Although a qualitative researcher's participatory behavior is meant to transform social reality, the researcher's direct involvement may be viewed by some as a barrier to legitimacy (Pozzebon, 2018). Qualitative studies can be rejected for publication more than quantitative studies because of methodological quality and reporting quality (Toews et al., 2016). Ongoing efforts must be made by the qualitative researcher to preserve public trust in research and in research institutions and to remain in compliance with regulatory mandates (Yarborough & Sharp, 2002). To promote integrity and trustworthiness, researchers should share goals with the communities they serve, allow oversight of research activities, and participate in training programs that build professional character (Yarborough & Sharp, 2002).

As a qualitative researcher, I was the data collection instrument for this study. Elementary school administrators in one Illinois school district electronically completed interview questions which examine potential barriers in educating foster youth. I am an active and current foster parent of elementary school-aged foster children. This position opened up the potential for bias because I have personally experienced barriers within the collaboration and communication of child welfare team members and educational representatives. Transparency is important because research denotes the importance of and the lack of communication amongst school, caregiver, and child welfare agency as

being a critical factor and barrier in the program delivery and academic decline or progression of foster students (Noonan et al., 2012; Pirttimaa & Valivaara, 2017; Zetlin et al., 2012; Zetlin, et al. 2010). Researchers should be cognizant of cultural identification and self-aware and self-reflective to maintain the spirit of ethical qualitative research (Karagiozis, 2018). I organized my research method, engaged with school administrators, and interpreted my findings in an ethical and culturally sensitive manner.

Because of the affinity and relationship I had to the research topic, bracketing mitigated potential biases. Bracketing is a scientific process in which the researcher sets aside personal experiences, biases, and assumptions to recognize the phenomenon being studied (Gearing, 2004). I had an expert in the child welfare field and in the educational field review the interview questions prior to sending to participants. In addition, I kept a reflective journal. Reflective journaling promotes methodological rigor and creates transparency in the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). My data method shifted from the face-to-face interviews to the electronic dispensing of interview questions because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reflective journaling provided physical evidence of the feelings, needs, and desires I had because of the method shift. Journaling identified how the method shift impacted my research as I read through their written responses (see further discussion in the discussion of data collection procedures).

To ensure ethical behaviors, I completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training. CITI training increases research knowledge amongst professionals and promotes ethical research practices (CITI, 2019). Along with Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (03-06-20-0448467), I also

submitted to the IRB of the targeted school district. Because of the unforeseen events of the COVID-19 pandemic, the face-to-face interview method originally approved shifted to an online submission of interview questions. Participants were informed through email narratives and email attachments of the consent form of their ability to withdraw from the study at any time or to refuse answering any questions without penalty. Participants obtained a copy of the consent form electronically.

I used a common and acceptable email platform for communications. The interview questions provided no to minimal risk of discomfort for the participants. Although responses were electronically sent back to me, I recorded the data with no identifiers linked to the participants to put them at risk of employable damages. I reported the responses as aggregate or group data. While there would be probable publication as a result of this study, I asked for participants to bold yes or no on the emailed questionnaire in order to use direct quotes without names. I stored electronic data, written data, and written notes in a password protected file and in a locked filing cabinet in my office.

## **Methodology**

### **Participants and Recruitment**

The study population consisted of elementary school administrators within one school district in Illinois. Although school systems and state regulations vary, general elementary education involves kindergarten through Grade 8 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The targeted school district houses nine elementary schools, two middle schools, and six specialty schools that encompass elementary grade levels. Administrative positions held by the participants included principalship and assistant

principalship. There were 19 principal or assistant principal positions that composed the administrative framework of the elementary educational institutions in the targeted district at the time of my research. I chose the sample participants because of the shared role in the educational experience of elementary foster students.

After obtaining written IRB approval from the school district and from Walden University to engage in the research, the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, removing the opportunity to perform face-to-face interviews as originally approved. After many attempts to schedule interviews, it became clear that potential participants in my population were not able to commit synchronous time to a research study. My need to adjust data collection was three-fold:

1. School personnel, including principals and teachers, faced an unprecedented change to their work operations. Most schools, worldwide, nationwide, and state-wide shifted to online instruction. Even 1 year into the COVID-19 pandemic, 31 countries still experienced full school closures while 48 countries experienced reduce academic schedules, leaving 800 million students still in academic uncertainty (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021). This meant revisioning administrative and teacher work and student instruction. Principals' and teachers' time was taken up by planning and reorganizing their work.
2. After May 2020, the school year naturally shifted to summer break—traditionally a difficult time to contact and connect with school personnel.

3. Coupled with the summer break, much of principals' time was taken up in meetings, planning, and strategizing on how to deliver on the promise of education to district students for the 2020 Fall school start with the COVID-19 pandemic still causing disruptions.

Each of these reasons made interviewing principals more of a challenge.

Karwanto (2020) noted that COVID-19 required principals to maintain communication and synergy with teachers despite the online learning process; to monitor and evaluate the new work structure of teachers and students; to supervise online learning practices; and to create a pleasurable learning environment for staff and students. Their time and energy were focused on instructional delivery, changes to their work and adapting to the pandemic, and of course stresses in their own life due to the pandemic. This impact made interviewing principals and assistant principals live (through phone or online conference) virtually impossible. This required me to adjust my data collection method.

I made the decision to conduct an email interview/questionnaire using my same interview questions. This became necessary after several attempts to schedule interviews with principals and because of the time constraints in collecting data. Hawkins (2018) noted the email interview was a very effective method of data collection because participants already had computer access, had consistent internet connectivity, routinely communicate through email, were comfortable with technology, and were already engaged in online learning. I determined that principals during the pandemic met these same distinct reasons for pursuing an email interview.



According to Cook (2012), email interviews can be an effective means of rich data collection. A researcher can use computer-mediated, data collection to include participants who may have been excluded from the study for reasons such as distance, scheduling, physical or emotional reasons. (Cook, 2012; McCoyd & Kerson, 2006). Cook (2012) found that retention was high during the email interview process. The email format allowed for additional reflexivity in terms of responses and data. Cook (2012) concluded that in-depth, email interviews can still generate rich and connect with participants in a meaningful way. Furthermore, Mason and Ide (2014) found that utilizing methodologies that align with the preferred environment of the participants results in more natural, reflective exchanges of data. Emailed interviews allow participants a perceived level of anonymity and allow participants to feel less power dominated by the interviewer thus increasing the willingness to share intimate details and increasing the richness of the data (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Mason & Ide, 2014). In terms of my study, I determined that principals during the pandemic had these same distinct reasons for pursuing an email interview and adjusted my data collection method with approval from IRB.

Instead of scheduling interviews, participants were emailed the interview questions. The letter of invitation and the consent form were revised from what was previously approved to reflect the collection method change. Because of the pandemic, Walden University's IRB allowed these revisions to occur without submitting procedural change documentation.

Recruitment occurred through a mass email to those who carried the principal or assistant principal position at an elementary school within the targeted school district. School administrator, faculty, and staff emails are publicly accessible through the District's website. The letter of invitation was sent out to possible participants, and follow-up emails were sent after the original email to inform administrators of the opportunity to participate. Because of multiple factors including the pandemic, the end of the school year, and the email restrictions/security on the targeted school district's system, participant interest was not enough to sustain the research. I submitted a request for procedural changes to the Walden University's IRB to include snowballing in an attempt to recruit more participants. The pandemic related adjustments were approved.

There was no cost to the participate and no rewards or incentives distributed to participants. Participants were informed that their participation would help contribute to a diverse body of knowledge. Participants did not have any relationships or commitments to the researcher, thus eliminating any conflicts of interest.

### **Instrumentation**

The data source for this study was from interviews with principals and assistant principals of elementary schools in one local school district. Ten open-ended questions were emailed to participants to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators in teaching foster children.

In order to achieve triangulation, I reviewed electronically accessible district information regarding trauma and training. Trauma informed training, through face to

face and virtual means, included information on trauma definitions, concepts, myths, and resilience, with additional access to state and national references pertaining to adverse childhood experiences. Child developmental resources were also available, as was professional development information. The State of Illinois, as do other states, recognize educational personnel as mandated reporters in maltreatment situations (Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act, n.d.). Mandated reporting information, processes, and forms were electronically accessible for those required by law to report suspected maltreatment situations (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2020). Triangulation assumes that no singular method fully supports the research phenomenon and that multiple sources of collection and analysis validates the research method (Patton, 1999).

### **Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis**

#### **Modified Interviews**

As a result of the pandemic, the semi-structured interviews with elementary principals and assistant principals originally approved were modified to include interview questions being sent electronically to participants. After snowballing, participants who expressed interest were sent a consent form (see Appendix B) and were emailed a series of questions about their experiences in teaching foster youth (see Appendix A). Participants were given a lengthy deadline to complete the 10 questions at a pace that was respectful to the current climate of their professional and personal responsibilities. Consent was assumed when participants sent back the completed questionnaire. These questions were assessed for effectiveness prior to use by experts in the education and

child welfare domains. Expert review of questions ensure content validity (Belotto, 2018). Upon receiving the completed questions, the researcher sent the participant a thank you email.

### **Coding**

Participants were sent interview questions through email. Belotto (2018) states emailed questionnaires extract the same core information from each participant, while simultaneously offering flexibility to probe deeper into participant's individual experiences through follow-up emails if necessary. After receiving the data from each participant, the content was eliminated of all identifying information and was coded.

Pulling data from individual interview notes required a level of complex organization which can benefit from software utilization. However, complex software may be unavailable, require advance training, and be time consuming in set-up, thus organization in a simple, singular location may be more beneficial (Vaughn & Turner, 2016). Since the data was already in electronic form when the participant responded back and had no need for transcription, there was no software used to organize the material other than a password protected laptop to house the data.

Analyzing data occurs through coding techniques. The coding, sifting, and sorting of data challenges the nature, quality, and reliability of qualitative research (Chowdhury, n.d.). Despite no optimal coding technique, researchers should thoughtfully apply a technique or a combination of techniques that directly align with the studied topic and that give robustness to the research (Blair, 2016). Not all data will fall seamlessly into a code. (Blair, 2016). I analyzed the data through both open and priori coding techniques

Open coding allows patterns to emerge from the data thus creating clear, participant based codes (Blair, 2016; Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016). However, with open coding, reflectivity may promote bias and may promote subjective enhancement of the research (Blair, 2016).

Prior coding involves codes that are pre-established based on what the researcher anticipates (Burkholder, Cox, & Crawford, 2016). I began with priori codes that were focused on limited resources, influence or rate of parent involvement, and communication with child welfare members, based on previous literature and existing research findings. However, I used emergent codes as well to identify trends and patterns (resulting in themes) that existed specific to the targeted school district that were not identified in advance.

I coded both the emailed questions and documents that I reviewed manually. Hand-writing words or statements into pre-established categories highlights each participant's data singularly (Percy et al., 2015). Categories are put into clusters of like information (Percy et al, 2015). I connected the pre-established categories to my research and coded the information into clusters. Clusters of information form patterns and expose the overarching themes (Percy et al, 2015). My analysis process was completed with each participant's data, and patterns were combined from all participants to form the themes discussed in Chapter 4.

## **Issues of Trustworthiness**

### **Credibility (Internal Validity)**

Establishing a trustworthy protocol that frames rigors, process, and timeline helps add to the comprehensiveness and quality of research (Amankwaa, 2016).

Trustworthiness should be planned ahead of time and should include times and dates of implementation and completion (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility in qualitative research can be attained through processes of peer debriefing, member checks, and journaling (Amankwaa, 2016; Connelly, 2016). In my research, I performed journaling to both help with credibility and confirmability as further explained later in this section.

Bernstein (2018) argues that research should be judged on how well the study moves learning forward, satisfying the internal validity component of research. The internal validity of this study was threatened because the participants, being school administrators, could have dropped from the study because of a change in position, in roles, or in the students being served. Recruiting a larger participant sample to compensate for the potential dropouts could have reduced this threat. However, the targeted school district had only 17 schools that met the elementary level status, so the larger recruitment base would have had to branch out into other neighboring districts. This study involved a modified interview with questions being sent by email in a one-time setting. Principals and assistant principals explored their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in working with foster youth during a singular correspondence. This eliminated the opportunity for elements to change during the research's passage of time, particularly in light of the pandemic, of school closings, and of school year conclusion.

**Transferability (External Validity)**

The ability to generalize the outcomes outside of the studied population refers to external validity (Berstein, 2018). In qualitative research, researchers are focused on the generalizability of their results and on the transferability of themes to other, similar contexts and settings (Berstein, 2018). In transferability, it is important to obtain thick, no less than one sentence answers when interviewing (Amankwaa, 2016). A clear and detailed representation of information allows the phenomenon to be replicated in another setting (Amankwaa, 2016). This study focused on the elementary public school setting, thus making it difficult to inject the outcomes into other settings, such as private school, high school, or home school. Ultimately, the transferability and the applicability of these results will be at the discretion of future researchers. Conducting future research in the varying educational settings that foster students are enrolled in will help negate this external threat.

**Dependability**

By following a researchers' decision trail, a study that is repeatable and consistent is dependable (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). In this study, I used triangulation. Triangulation ensures dependability by using multiple data sources to understand the phenomenon (Amankwaa, 2016). I collected data from different samples, using the same questions, so that I could understand how administrators and teachers both work to support foster students who have suffered abuse or maltreatment. In addition to data triangulation, I used methodological triangulation and also reviewed multiple documents available through publicly accessible means or by referral from school district directors.

Such documents included information on trauma informed training, mandated reporting processes of the school district, and demographic information of enrolled students.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability involves a level of neutrality that allows research findings to represent the respondent's perspective rather than the researcher's bias (Amankwaa, 2016). Palaganas et al (2017) denotes the impossibility of a researcher to remain completely outside of the study and to delete all biases. Building reflexivity into research methods and data analysis are important as it allows us to recognize the significant impact self-awareness and self-consciousness has on how we perceive the world (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Reflective journaling is a validity check for qualitative research. I performed journaling, which included reflective notes that described any pre-conceived assumptions or biases I brought to the research and provided physical evidence of my feelings, needs, and frustrations which could impact the research. Journaling every week once data collection started enhanced my ability to be reflective on my role as a researcher and to be cognizant of what I am doing in the thick of my research. Providing rich quotes directly from participants, describing how conclusions and interpretations were done, and emphasizing that information was derived directly from the data will also contribute to confirmability (Cope, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators, who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois. I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the



school administrators' perspectives on teaching foster youth. The pandemic-related change of emailing interview questions rather than verbalizing them face to face, although not ideal, allowed for a greater understanding of the depth of participants' experiences (see discussion of Cook, [2012]'s review of intensive interviewing via email). By being aware of threats that hinder the validity and reliability of the research, I employed strategies that sought to eliminate or minimize such threats. In Chapter 4, I will present the data analysis and results related to school administrators' perspectives on teaching foster children.

## Chapter 4: Results

I focused on a case study design which focused on the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth. Focusing on their work teaching and supporting foster children, I targeted one school district in order to gain a deeper understanding of principal's and assistant principal's experiences in educating foster children in the elementary setting. This chapter addresses the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and results of this research study.

### **Setting**

After many attempts to schedule interviews, it became clear that potential participants in my population were not able to commit synchronous time to a research study. IRB approved an addendum to replace face-to-face interviews with email interviews. My need to adjust data collection was three fold:

1. Principals faced an unprecedented change to their work operations.
2. After May, the school year naturally shifted to summer break—traditionally a difficult time to contact and connect with principals.
3. Coupled with the summer break, much of principals' time was taken up in meetings and planning for the academic delivery 2020 Fall school start still amidst the pandemic.

Each of these reasons made interviewing principals more of a challenge, and I made the decision to conduct an email interview/questionnaire using my interview questions. Amidst the pandemic, the conclusion of the school year, and the summer

break, I concurred with Fritz and Vandermoouse (2017), that participants would appreciate the convenience of emailed interviews. According to Cook (2012), email interviews can be an effective means of rich data collection. Cook (2012) and McCoyd and Kerson (2006) suggest computer-mediated data collection enables participants who may not be able to commit to synchronous interviews to maintain participation as qualified and purposefully chosen participants. Cook (2012) concluded that in-depth, email interviews can still generate rich and connect with participants in a meaningful way. I determined that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, principals met these same distinct reasons for pursuing an email interview and adjusted my data collection method with approval from IRB.

In addition to complications with in-person interviewing, soon after the IRB approval of the study, increased cyber security in the district's communication technology prohibited my direct recruitment of participants via email. After IRB additional procedural change submission and acceptance, the snowballing technique yielded additional participants.

Unable to perform face-to-face interviews as originally planned, I sent the interview questions by email to participants. Interview questions were emailed to participants because of the participants' lack of virtual technology and because of the ability for participants to complete the interview at a time convenient for them. Participants were given 1 month to complete the emailed questions to accommodate to COVID-19 challenges and the school year ending.

In the emailed recruitment letter and associated reminders, participants were given both my email and personal phone number in case of questions. Interested participants all emailed me versus phoning me, confirming their preference of email participation instead of telephone participation. After receiving my emailed responses, it was clear that participants took the time to provide thoughtful, complete, and well-developed responses. I felt the responses were rich and deep as I would have hoped for with in-person interviewing. Although aspects such as hesitations in responding and nonverbal cues were not something that I could note, I did receive rich, descriptive responses highlighting the participants' experiences and perspective. The reflectivity of data and the willingness to share intimate details associated with email interviewing (Bampton & Cowton, 2002; Cook, 2012; Mason & Ide, 2014) were present in my participants' answers. Participants' comments, such as "It's hard for me," "I wish I knew how to fix it," "I was shocked," "I wish there was a magic wand," "I am left wondering how they are," and "I appreciate the thought-provoking questions and attentiveness you've given to this area of education" signified to me that participants connected to the interview questions at a depth that showed personal vulnerability, appreciation, and reflectivity.

### **Demographics**

Participants held either a principal or an assistant principal position at an elementary school within the targeted school district. Minimally, individuals had at least 1 year of teaching experience in addition to a minimum of 1 year of experience in the principal or assistant principal position. I communicated with participants through email;

however, my personal phone was offered if telecommunication was preferred by the participant.

### **Data Collection**

Nineteen elementary principals and assistant principals in the targeted school district were sent emailed invitations. Follow-up reminders were sent to individuals. Those who expressed participatory interest were sent the interview questions, were sent follow-up reminders for completion, and were sent a thank you email after submission. After using snowballing, a procedural change from the original IRB submission, the final sample yielded seven participants completing the emailed interview questions in the May to June collection time frame.

### **Data Analysis**

The study reached data saturation with seven participants. Data saturation is reached when no new material is obtained, and coding becomes exhaustive (Fusch & Ness, 2015). A label between Participant (P)1- Participant (P)7 was given to each response received and identifying information was removed. Guided by the interview questions, main areas of inquiry were (a) process and timeliness of information retrieval, (b) instructional and administrative challenges, (c) child welfare agency involvement, (d) support service/resource availability, and (e) needed changes. Preliminary codes were used which included information sharing, challenges, collaboration, needs, support services and resources, and needed changes for success. Additional subcodes were developed which included instructional challenges, general challenges, relationships, emotional toll, timing, team member interactions, and barriers. Five thematic categories

occurred across the main areas of inquiry. These themes were: needs/barriers around support within the student experience, general and instructional challenges facing school administration, collaboration and the impact on student experiences, support services/resources impacting student and teacher, and changes needed to serve foster students in the educational setting.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

To ensure credibility and confirmability, I participated in weekly journaling once data collection began. This reflectivity highlighted the preconceived assumptions I brought to the research. These assumptions included pandemic related biases of participants being too busy, too overwhelmed, and not interested in completing my interview. Additionally, I assumed interview questions would be best received if emailed, rather than delivered face-to-face or through virtual means. I emailed the questions to allow for self-progression and to promote sensitivity to the professional and personal commitments of participants amidst the pandemic. Low participant interest at the start of my research prompted a data method change, which included snowballing. Snowballing yielded adequate participant involvement to reach saturation, and the email delivery mechanism was best suited for this population in the current circumstances since saturation was obtained. By having a participant forward my research invitation letter through her internal electronic communications, an internal validity threat was thwarted, as it recognized those administrators who had changed roles from what my original listings, and it recognized new administrators who assumed a principal/assistant principalship position who were not listed on outdated publicly accessible documents.

This study focused on elementary level, public school principals and assistant principals. This level specificity and positional status made it difficult to transfer the research outcomes to other settings, such as the private, high school, or home school sectors. Injection of my research outcomes as well as specificity to the various educational settings will be at the discretion of future researchers.

I reviewed multiple documents, including trauma-informed training narratives, mandated reporting processes, and student demographic information to ensure dependability. Multiple participants recognized the helpfulness of the trauma informed-training they received through the school district. Electronically accessible information on the district's website regarding trauma training included information on trauma definitions, misconceptions, resilience, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and links to the Center for Disease Control and the Illinois Multi-Tiered System of Support Network (Decatur Public Schools, 2020). Also accessible are the Developmental Assets for ages 5–9 (Kindergarten through third grade) and ages 8-12 (middle childhood), along with suicide prevention, bullying prevention, and mental health first aid (Decatur Public Schools, 2020).

## **Results**

Each coded statement was scrutinized to ensure appropriate categorization and to ensure relevance to the research question. Themes began to emerge with further subcategories within each theme evident. Five themes were identified and are noted below with direct quotes to exemplify the administrators' experiences with educating foster youth. These themes were needs/barriers around support within the student

experience, general and instructional challenges facing school administration, collaboration and the impact on student experiences, support services/resources impacting student and teacher, and changes needed to serve foster students in the educational setting.

### **Theme 1: Needs/Barriers Around Consistent Support Within the Student Experience**

The needs and the barriers in meeting these needs affect the educational experience. Six of seven participants noted the need for foster students to have consistent social-emotional support services, including regular counseling and trauma informed care. P2 stated the greatest needs are “trauma-informed care, structure, to be loved-even if they are acting in an unlovable way.” A structured/safe environment, supportive welfare team, positive adult relationships, and unconditional love were also noted. For example, P5 stated:

The first and foremost need is the need to feel safe. In order for them to feel safe, they need to be able to trust. This is where building positive relationships is essential. All are important, but positive adult relationships have a great impact. This can be extremely difficult/taxing at times, but it has such a positive impact on the child’s life.

Barriers prohibited execution of services to meet the needs of elementary foster students. These barriers stemmed from administrative, academic, and home issues. Administratively, different child welfare agencies utilized different ways to handle situations. Participant 7 stated:



It also seems like the different agencies handle foster situations differently. I do feel like the caseworkers care about the children and want what is best for them but many times policies/procedures are cumbersome in getting them the help they need.

Many participants recognized the caseworkers' large caseloads, difficult work, and overall caring attitude. However, caseworkers seemed to be spread too thin with cases, the policies and procedures were cumbersome in getting the services they needed, and the large caseloads led to poor communication. Community services were limited, and even if available, they were too costly for schools to utilize these services. Turnover rates of caseworkers at child welfare agencies, as well as position vacancies for social workers at schools were also noted barriers. According to P3,

I don't know the turn-over rate at DCFS, but I'm going to guess it is high. In 25 years, it seems that every time I encountered a caseworker it was someone new.

This past year, every time I encountered DCFS, they had someone with them that they were training.

Along with administrative barriers, academic and home issues created challenges for principals and assistant principals. The lack of trusting relationships stemming from trauma impacted academic functioning, especially evident in the lack of focus in the classroom and displayed behavioral issues. According to P7,

It is an unfortunate reality that many students at my school (whether in foster care or not) have experienced abuse. The challenges are often unpredictable because

different things can trigger a student and bring back the trauma of the abuse they are dealing with.

In turn, office and counseling visits prohibited academic and classroom attendance. P1 noted, “Most of our students in foster care do received some kind of counseling services, but the follow up on those services is often based on the foster parents’ commitment to the students.” P1 further explained the anemic home support and the impact on social/emotional health by stating:

Many of our children in foster care have not received adequate support academically or socially/emotionally at home and are behind and struggle with coping. Meeting those needs and then getting access to services they need through the process is usually the most difficult piece of instructing these students.

## **Theme 2: General and Instructional Challenges Facing School Administration, Support and Instruction**

Participants noted challenges both from a general perspective and an instructional perspective. Because of the trauma experience, the triggers experienced by foster students were unpredictable, and the need for counselor and social worker interventions increased. Additionally, it was difficult to help foster students feel safe and develop coping skills, particularly when no one knew how long the foster student was going to stay enrolled in the school. According to P1, the challenge is

Helping them to learn coping skills, that they are valuable, and finding them the supports that they need. It is so important that the students know that they have your unconditional support even when they are struggling.

Relationship development, support service availability, and constant emotional toll attributed to the instructional challenges principals and assistant principals faced with educating foster students. Four participants acknowledged the challenges of relationship development and trust development. P2 stated, “kids aren’t always receptive to someone after going through various circumstances. I assume it’s difficult for them to trust. It’s hard for me.” Furthermore, P5 reflects on trauma and relationships stating, “This trauma can sometimes directly affect the relationships they are able to build, create barriers with building trust, and cause significant behavioral issues. P3 noted:

I have found it can be difficult to develop a relationship with kids in foster care and the more homes the kids have been in, the harder it is...At the start of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, this little boy will have attended six schools.”

In addition to foster students’ relational difficulty, two participants noted the relational challenges with biological parents. P6 stated, “There have been a few cases where the parent the child has been removed from tried to contact the child at school or reaches out to the school for information.” Additionally, P3 noted the difficulty in communicating with the biological parent because the parent kept blaming the children for the familial situation. P3 stated, “I had lots of contact with the Mom and she always blamed the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade for her problems and I so wanted to tell her how wrong she was that she only had herself to blame for the situation.”

Support service availability was discussed by three participants as being a challenge. P4 stated the greatest challenge is “providing or finding adequate support services. Also, with discretion and privacy laws adhered to, talking to specific staff who have direct contact with the student about behaviors they may witness, and to provide some grade in certain situations.” Getting access to services and ensuring retrieval of services was difficult, particularly academic and social emotional support. P5 stated, “The challenge lies in creating a system of support within the building that allows the student to flourish.”

The emotional toll in instructing foster students was noted by three participants. Participants had increased worry and increased outpouring of love and support for foster students. P3 noted, “As a teacher, I found I worried more about these children and worked harder to form a relationship.” Another participant stated, “we just continue to support and love a little more.” The process of building relationships would be jeopardized because of the uncertainty of how long the foster student would stay in <said> school. P2 stated, “It’s hard for me-sometimes kids don’t stay long and then I am left wondering how they are.”

The general and instructional challenges mentioned above were succinct. However, one non confirming datum was noticed and should be noted. The biggest challenge one participant noted was not related to the aforementioned relationship development, support service availability, or emotional toll, but rather with school personnel and information exchange. P4 noted “the biggest challenge is making sure school personnel (teachers, secretaries, nurse, parent liaisons, etc.) have the appropriate

information but not violating any privacy issues.” This singular datum may be relevant to the collaboration experienced discussed in theme 3.

### **Theme 3: Collaboration has an Impact on Student Experiences**

Participants noted the impact of collaboration on information sharing, information timing, and team member interactions. Six participants stated they were informed of the student’s foster status through communications with similar parties, such as the DCFS caseworker or the foster parent. P1 stated, “Typically we are contacted by DCFS and notified that a family is being placed into care,” while P3 noted that “I only found out about foster care from reading a student’s file or the foster parent introducing themselves to me and indicating they were a ‘foster parent’ parent.” Most participants experienced quick notification of foster status at the time of registration or the time of placement. For example, P1 explained, “It is usually a very quick turn-around. Most changes are effective immediately and we are notified of custodial changes.” P5 noted they “are given the information on a student’s foster care status when they are being registered,” while P7 stated, “It varies...usually within a day or two.”

Even though principals/assistant principals were informed of the foster care status of a student in a relatively timely manner, the retrieval of background information and the timeliness of this information retrieval did not follow the same pattern. For example, P7 stated, “Generally, I am not informed about the specific details and background information. Sometimes, classroom teachers get specific information from the caseworker.” P6 explained that background information was shared at registrations, but “other times it has been shared with administration when working through behavior

concerns.” One participant received background information immediately as stated by P4 of “within 48 hours.” Contrarily, others noted retrieval was sporadic ranging from very timely information to no information at all. As denoted by P1, “there have been times that we have had to reach out and ask for information, but we are typically given any information that they feel is pertinent when the foster placement is made.” P2 further explained background information retrieval was “usually very timely-or, in a few cases, not at all.”

Participants were informed of the background information of a foster student by similar informants as described in the previous paragraph when describing foster care status. Five participants noted they received background information from a DCFS case worker or the school social worker. P5 noted:

We are generally informed of background information (especially instances of abuse or maltreatment) by the DCFS case worker or guardian before the child starts school. In one instance of serious abuse/maltreatment, DCFS directly reached out to me to discuss a student in hopes of setting up an immediate plan to help them succeed.

Even though informants notified school personnel about background information, the depth of the information provided varied. P3 explained:

A lot of information depends on how much the social worker in the building is willing to share with the teacher or admin. I have found that some DCFS workers give more information than others-so it depends on the caseworker.

Along with information sharing and timing, team member interactions either supported or negated collaborative efforts. Participant experiences with child welfare agencies varied. While some noted positivism, responsiveness, and helpfulness associated with interactions, others denoted difficulty and uncooperativeness. Four participants noted varied experiences with interactions from case to case. P3 stated, “I have had mixed experiences-it depends on the caseworker. As with all professions, you have excellent, good, and unacceptable and that is exactly what I have experienced.”

Additionally, P5 explained:

Most of the time, I have no issues working with child welfare agencies. DCFS has been quite slow to responding sometimes though. I feel the agencies are a mix of good/bad help. Some case workers are absolutely wonderful (get back to you immediately, stay in constant contact, and truly seem to care), while others are tough to even get ahold of after the initial conversation.

P2 further explains his/her experiences stating, “Depends on the caseworker-I have met some very kind, caring caseworkers. I’ve worked with some who have not been kind or cooperative. It’s so much better when we are working together.”

Caseworker effort and overload were recognized, but the lack of support to foster families, especially relative families, was noted. One participant expressed frustration with the mandated reporting process. P1 stated:

It’s been difficult at times. We are mandated reporters, yet I have personally had to sit across from a parent that I sent a report in for and tell what I saw. We have had several teachers report and then told that it wasn’t valid, and they would

record the call but would not investigate. Many times, they do try to keep up but I think often the case workers are overwhelmed and don't offer a lot of support to the foster families, especially if it is a relative.

Information sharing, information timing, and team member interaction were recognized as factors effecting collaborative efforts amongst child welfare team members.

#### **Theme 4: Support Services/Resources Impact Student and Teacher Experiences**

The presence or lack thereof of support services/resources impacted the foster student's educational experience and the teacher's instructional delivery. Four participants noted the involvement of and presence of a social worker and counselor within the school who collaborate with other child welfare team members to ensure the needs of the foster students are met. However, obtaining parental/guardian consent and sharing a social worker with another school make it difficult to meet needs, despite DCFS involvement in finding support services outside of the school. Although some type of counseling was offered, follow-up on those services depended on the foster parent's commitment to the student.

In addition to social worker and counselor interventions, two participants noted extra interventions particularly beneficial to their schools. For example, P2 stated:

We have implemented what we call 'Trauma Traits.' These are 5 things we do as a building regularly: teaching breathing exercises to help with regulating, physical activity daily, <School> Round-Up daily (check-in peace circle), greeting students by name each morning, and <School> Message-a positive message created by each class to help combat the negative whether inner voice or from



others.

Trauma-informed training for staff was helpful for those who worked directly with the foster student. A list of support services was immediately available, which helped both the school and the foster parents access school transportation, supplies, clothing, medical referrals, and food baskets.

The lack of support services/resources for teachers teaching foster students was noted by all participants. Support came through informal means from the school social worker, administration, and other teachers. For example, P6 stated:

This is where we can do more to support the child. The lack of information and training for teachers impacts the foster child's experience. There is information sharing to the teachers, but it seems training for staff on the psychological effects on students in foster care is done on the fly or in reaction. Trauma informed training has made improvements in this area.

Although the occurrence of trauma informed practice trainings to staff were noted by two participants, other participants noted the lack of resources available and the expense schools must incur to offer professional development and to schedule a substitute. P1 denoted support services availability was:

Verry little. I am not sure that we have had any support offered to us through the foster care agencies. As a building, we have completed several trauma informed practice trainings and have worked with behavior interventionists to receive trainings on dealing with students who have suffered trauma, but community

resources are limited and usually cost the school funding to provide the PD to staff.

The foster student's experience and the teacher's ability to instruct was impacted by the presence or absence of support/services

### **Theme 5: Changes Needed to Serve Foster Students in the Educational Setting**

To better serve foster students, changes are needed in the educational setting. Three participants highlighted not only the need for more training and guidance for teachers, but also the funds to engage in such support. P3 stated, "there is Professional Development that is available-of course the school has to have the money to pay for it and then you have to have a sub for the day-so it's not as easy as it should be."

Along with weak teacher support, participants noted the need for more social workers, more support for child welfare workers, and more counseling and mental health services for foster students. P3 explained, "I wish I knew how to fix it-we need more social workers; we need more training for school personnel, we need to provide counseling to students (to ensure that their mental health is a priority)." Improved documentation and communication amongst child welfare team members were needed to better serve foster students. P1 stated:

It would make a huge difference to the students if the case worker, foster parent, and school staff could meet on a regular basis to discuss student needs, resources, updates, etc. These students need to be surrounded by support.

Although the data addressed needed changes pertaining to particular child welfare team members, including teachers, foster students, and child welfare workers, only one

participant focused on the foster family. This non-conforming datum noted by P4 included the need for more careful and critical examination of foster homes. The vetting of foster homes was needed to better serve foster students.

### **Triangulation**

As noted in Chapter 3, triangulation occurred by using multiple electronically accessible data from district, state, and organizational websites. As noted in Chapter 4, participants explained the detriment of trauma on academic achievement and the significant need for more trauma informed training and support. District documents noted the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) training availability and this training's focus was not only the academic and behavioral implications in school, but also the long-term health consequences of childhood trauma (Decatur Public Schools, 2021; Center for Disease Control, 2020). Although my research was focused on the academic domain, the long-term health and development implications casted a different dimension of trauma-related outcomes.

In Chapter 4, participants denoted the frustration with the mandated reporting process. The Illinois State Board of Education (2019) denotes that within the targeted school district, 71.9% of students come from low income households or classified as homeless, migrant, runaway, Head Start, or foster children. Additionally, the targeted school district has higher rates of child abuse and neglect per capita than other counties in Illinois (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2014). Children living in low socioeconomic settings are 5 times more likely to experience child abuse and neglect (Center for Disease Control, 2020). By nature of the demographics of the targeted school

district, the mandated reporting process is critical in recognizing and reporting students who have had or are currently living within adverse childhood experiences. The frustrations of the mandated reporting experience noted in this research is concerning as the professionals highest in referral reports are educational personnel followed legal and law enforcement personnel and medical personnel (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2019).

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed the qualitative data derived from interviews conducted electronically with school administrators on their experiences, perceptions, and challenges in teaching foster youth in one Illinois school district. Seven elementary principals/assistant principals answered ten questions which presented five common themes. These themes include: needs/barriers around support within the student experience, general and instructional challenges facing school administration, collaboration and the impact on student experiences, support services/resources impacting student and teacher, and changes needed to serve foster students in the educational setting.

Participants noted the need for foster students to have consistent social-emotional support services, but academic, administrative, and home issues challenged the delivery of needed services. School administrators faced general and instructional challenges when educating foster students. Foster students' experiences were impacted by the collaboration amongst child welfare team members and the timeliness of such members

sharing information. The lack of support services/resources for teachers was evident, and while support services/resources were present for foster students, follow through with these offerings were an issue. Changes are needed to better serve foster students in the educational setting.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of elementary school administrators who work with foster youth in one school district in Illinois, focusing on their work teaching and supporting foster children especially those who have suffered abuse or maltreatment. Using a case study design, I collected data from elementary school administrators to better understand the experiences, perceptions, and challenges these individuals encountered in their work with elementary foster students. The data obtained revealed five themes. In this chapter, I will interpret key findings from these themes while also discussing the limitations, recommendations, and implications of the study.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Five themes emerged from the coded data. The themes focused on needs/barriers, general and instructional challenges, collaboration, support services/resources, and needed changes. The findings in this research confirm existing literature regarding the educational journey of foster students.

According to existing literature, foster students have unique needs when compared to their nonfoster peers. Six of seven principals/ assistant principals noted the need for emotional/mental support services, including counseling and trauma informed care. This is particularly important because of the emotional demands foster children face in general with the physical relocation, the sibling caretaker role, and food/shelter insecurities they experience prior to foster placement and during foster placement

(Clemens et al, 2017). Furthermore, children who experience childhood trauma and multiple foster placements have increased rates for mental disorders and outcomes both in childhood and in adulthood (Casey Family Programs, 2004, Hillen & Gafson, 2015, Turney & Wildeman, 2016).

Participants noted administrative, academic, and home barriers that impacted the delivery of services to elementary foster students. Principals and assistant principals highlighted the large caseloads of caseworkers that seemingly led to reduced communication. Increased administrative requirements, increased case complexities, and increased need for interventions challenge caseworkers' abilities to effectively serve the foster children and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). In Illinois, the governor's proposed Fiscal Year 2021 budget includes a 147 million dollar funding increase for the hiring of 123 DCFS direct service staff and for the increase in support of children involved in the foster program (Office of the Governor, 2020). This five percent rate increase to foster care and supporting institutions is only the second comprehensive rate increase in 19 years (Office of the Governor, 2020). Despite the financial increases, an interview with private agency caseworkers revealed this budgetary enhancement does not alleviate the problem. The majority of DCFS cases are funneled to private agencies to manage not DCFS despite the private agencies' already existing case overloads and lower salaries compared to DCFS caseworkers (Anonymous, 2019).

In addition to the administrative requirements, participants noted the importance and difficulty of providing consistent social-emotional support to help manage trauma experiences. Social-emotional support is critical because existing research shows that,

when compared to their non foster peers, foster children have an increased risk of mental and social-emotional dysfunction, particularly with externalizing behaviors and internalizing behaviors (Landsverk et al., 2009; Goemans et al., 2016; Jacobson et al., 2020). Externalizing behaviors include deviance, opposition, aggression, hyperactivity, and attention problems, whereas examples of internalizing behaviors would be depression, fear, anxiety, social withdrawal, and somatic symptoms (Willner et al., 2017). Furthermore, Conn et al. (2016) noted 71% of foster children ages 5-17 years were diagnosed with mental health issues related to emotional, inattention/hyperactivity, peer, and/or prosocial problems with 61% of this group receiving mental health treatment. These social-emotional difficulties permeate into the academic setting impacting school functioning.

The findings of this study also indicated the need and the challenge school principals and assistant principals face in helping the foster students develop and maintain trusting relationships. Research indicates that, due to background experiences and instability, foster students have difficulty with the concept of trust (Heyman et al, 2020) and have difficulty engaging in and establishing trusting and secure relationships with peers and adults (Nesmith & Christophersen, 2014; Krcmar & Karge, 2019). Foster students in an academic setting who feel safe and have trust are more likely to share aspects of their personal lives with school personnel, thus exhibiting positive relationship management skills (Krcmar & Karge, 2019). Furthermore, foster students were more likely to start conversations, communicate more effectively, and be more comfortable with adults at the school rather than with peers or parents, although peer-to-peer



conversations established social-emotional health. (Krcmar & Karge, 2019).

Additionally, participants emphasized the need for foster students to feel safe and supported and to feel successful. This supports Deutsch et al.'s (2020) findings, which showed the importance of a safe environment and caring relationships in developing self-esteem and mutual trust in foster youth.

School principals or assistant principals noted the challenges with instructing foster students derived more from systemic issues rather than direct student issues. Support service availability, support service access, relationship development, child welfare team collaboration, and emotional toll were challenges to instruction noted by six of seven participants. Only one participant noted direct student behavior, such as lack of focus and time out of the classroom, as a challenge to instruction. This unilateral finding was not expected since approximately 50% of the foster children who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for school have one for behavioral/emotional issues (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Foster children have increased rates of mental disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder, major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder and reactive attachment disorder (Engler et al, 2020). Emotional responses, including external and internal behaviors, can cause disruption in classroom focus, task completion, social interactions, and learning progression (McGuire & Jackson, 2019). With the prevalence of mental, behavioral, and emotional issues inflicting foster youth as signified in current research, this study suggested more systemic issues rather than direct student issues challenged the instructional process.

The impact and importance of multiagency collaboration was addressed by all participants. Such a comprehensive collaboration between schools, community-based agencies, and social service agencies is critical if foster students are to academically succeed (Anderson et al., 2016). In this study, this collaboration involved team member interactions, information sharing, and timeliness of information retrieval. DCFS caseworkers or foster parents were the primary sources of participants receiving information about a student's foster status. This chain of information sharing is expected because although schools, caregivers, courts, and other community constituents play key roles in the academic journey of a foster student, child welfare agencies have a direct responsibility and priority to communicate regularly with schools regarding student-specific information, to know what schools offer related to resources and services, and to nurture cross-system collaborations with community partners (American Bar Association, 2020).

Although most participants were notified of the student's foster status, the timeliness in receiving this student-specific information varied. Some participants noted an immediate retrieval of information, while other noted delayed or no retrieval of information. According to the Illinois School Code, within five days of DCFS taking custody of a foster child, caseworkers must submit a request to the former school for educational records (School Code, Illinois General Assembly). Additionally, the former school has 10 days from the time a record request is made to send the child's school records to the new school (School Code, Illinois General Assembly). It is unclear if the

delay of information retrieval in this study's findings is related to procedural issues across the cross-agency system or internal communication issues within the school.

Along with multiagency collaboration, participants noted a variety of experiences in working with child welfare workers. Participants acknowledged the stressful and tough demands of the caseworkers' role, but offered both positive and critical statements regarding the collaborative spirit. These varying experiences mimic similar experiences from the lens of other team members including the foster student and the foster family. Child welfare workers often carry heavy workloads, increased administrative tasks, and relational expectations which creates a distance between them and the foster child (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017; Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). Foster children note a formal and distant relationship with their worker driven by a lack of time, availability, and trust (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2017), while some foster parents offered positive remarks for the work of case managers while acknowledging the challenges of a strained system (Geiger et al. 2017).

The lack of support services/training for teachers was noted by all participants. Teachers play an obvious role in the academic experience of foster children. By understanding the complexities of trauma and its resulting behaviors, teachers can implement trauma-informed practices within the classroom and can support success of all students (Overstreet & Chafoules, 2016). Understanding the functions of trauma behavior and developing a solid teacher-foster student relationship are key components to the academic functions of students who have experienced complex trauma (Rosenbaum, 2018). Teachers who completed professional development on trauma response

significantly increased their knowledge of trauma-informed approaches (McIntyre, Baker, & Overstreet, 2019). Despite the benefits of trauma-informed practices, the multiple roles of school personnel, reduced interschool collaboration, and teacher hesitance negates trauma informed programming (Morton & Berardi, 2018).

### **Theoretical Context**

The ecological theory served as the theoretical scaffolding for this study. The development of human functions occurs within varying systems, including the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Rosa & Tudge, 2013, Stapleton & Chen, 2020). As previously noted, the findings of this study supported existing literature on the importance of inter-agency collaboration. Stapleton and Chen (2020) recommend a mesosystemic approach where approach, attitude, atmosphere, and action between parent and school intertwine together to promote educational success in foster youth. Colvin et al., (2020) included a more comprehensive identification of 80 organizations, including but not limited to schools, child protective services, civic groups, religious groups, and law enforcement, and 67 directors/administrators to expose interorganizational challenges that impacted the delivery child welfare services. Such challenges were associated with processes and procedures, resource and role negotiations, and environmental shifts in politics and policy (Colvin et al., 2020). These varying agencies and professional positions represent the ecological systems

### **Limitations of the Study**

As described in Chapter 1, this study had limitations. Because of the unforeseen events of and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including school shut-downs, the face-to-face interview method originally approved shifted to an emailed submission of interview questions. Although aspects such as hesitations in responding, behaviors, and nonverbal cues were not something that I could witness, I did receive rich, descriptive responses as discussed in Chapter 4 that allowed me to understand the participants' experiences and perspective.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic-related shift to the data collection method, a pandemic related shutdown of schools, and the natural ending of an academic year, a sufficient data sample was obtained and data saturation was reached, thus refuting the original limitation noted in Chapter 1. This participant sample included school administrators at only the elementary level and in only one Illinois school district, which limited the transferability of my findings to other settings. School principals and assistant principals were sampled which omits perspectives from other child welfare team members, such as educators and parents/guardians. Given these limitations, future research efforts should focus on additional school districts and other child welfare constituents.

### **Recommendations**

The scope and limitations of this study are bounded to one Illinois school district and one tier of school level. Future research efforts should focus on a broader spectrum of districts and levels. It is clear that no single group can appropriately and qualitatively

manage the needs of this vulnerable population. This study focused on only school administrators. Great benefit would be had if the perspectives on a foster child's educational framework could be gained from foster parents, teachers, and/or child welfare workers. In addition, this study addressed the elementary level of schooling in the public school sector, so there is value for future research behaviors to focus on the private or parochial settings since the educational infrastructure differs. Focusing on the setting, school level, and specific child welfare team members will only add to the existing child welfare knowledge and will offer additional recommendation and implications.

### **Implications**

Children in foster care have been exposed to a myriad of experiences that adversely impact their physical, mental, behavioral, relational, and educational health. The child welfare team is charged with monitoring these various aspects of health. It is wise to gain the perspectives of these team members as they evaluate and manage the support mechanisms foster children need. This study focused on the administrative perspective of teaching foster children at the elementary level. The data derived from this study can be used to inform practice for child welfare and education staff, to aid in the development of specific educational service plans, and to promote awareness of environmental and demographic components as it pertains to elementary foster students. The findings of this study highlighted the needs/barriers, general and instructional challenges, collaborative impact, and the support services/resources involved in serving foster students in the educational setting. The highlighted need to have consistent social emotional support services, including counseling and trauma informed training, and the

need for teacher training and support services can motivate school administrators to lobby for funding to hire staff to deliver these services to both students and teachers. The importance of collaboration can encourage administrators to develop and support team building activities and programming that unify rather than segregate school based and community constituents. Understanding the findings of this study not only benefits the foster student, in ensuring educational growth and success, but also the school personnel and child welfare agencies who toil to provide safe and nurturing environments.

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend school administrators to re-assess current practices. I recommend the presence of and consistency of social-emotional support services for foster students. Foster students need a comprehensive greater support structure which includes social skills support, mental health services, trauma-focused therapy, behavioral management plans, extracurricular opportunities and home/school collaboration (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). It is understandable and notable that tight financial constraints will hinder the implementation of all components of this recommendation. In conjunction with inter-school services, I recommend school administrators to nurture relationships with community based supports. Community based supports include a strong Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) program and committed educational liasons that can assist with educational issues and strategies (Anderson, 2016). Additionally, programming and services that focus on relationship development and management not only helps foster students overcome trust issues, but also helps teachers understand and support foster students' responses to trauma experiences.

## Conclusion

Foster children have unique needs compared to their non foster peers. Their experiences and the results of these experiences impact their ability to maneuver within the world they exist in. P1 explained:

Foster children are the most challenging students, but some of our most loving.

They need to be surrounded by support and some way to track their progress and their needs.

To aid and guide foster children through their journey, a complex network of people and services must exist. Understanding the experiences of those who work with foster children is critical to ensuring short term and long term success for the foster child.

This study focused on the school administrator's perspectives in teaching foster students at the elementary level. School administrators are in positions that offer the most potential to maintain and/or create vital educational components and processes that positively impact the foster students' academic experience. For example, administrators must be aware of the importance of and the level of social- emotional intelligence, be aware of a foster student's ability to form positive relationships, and be vigilant in providing the support structures to stabilize and develop both. However, this is not an easy task when faced with such great needs, with vast instructional and administrative challenges, with no to limited available support services, and with sporadic collaborative efforts of child welfare team members. Administrators must be aware of their own personal biases, be aware of foster students' backgrounds and needs, and be aware of the foster system components (Krcmar & Karge, 2019). The voices of elementary school



administrators in describing their experiences in teaching foster children echo the challenges these students present to the educational domain, but also offer the seeds to solutions in improving the academic stability and academic experiences of this population.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How have you been informed of students' foster care status?
  - a. How timely did you receive the information?
2. How are you informed of background information, specifically instances of abuse or maltreatment concerning the foster students?
  - a. How timely did you receive the information?
3. What challenges do school administrator's face while instructing students in foster care?
4. What challenges do you face dealing specifically with foster children who have experienced abuse or maltreatment?
5. What have been your experiences in working with child welfare agencies?
6. What do you think are a foster students' greatest needs especially when abuse and maltreatment is part of their earlier experiences?
7. What support services/ resources within education are available to students in foster care? How does previous abuse or maltreatment play a role in those services and resources?
8. What support services/resources within education are available to teachers who teach foster students?
9. What changes are needed to better serve foster students?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked about?

## Appendix B: Email/Letter

Greetings!

You might already know me as a professor at a local university, a parent, and/or a school volunteer in Decatur Public Schools (DPS), but this email reaches you because of another role I serve. My name is Tisha Hess, a doctoral student at Walden University, who is conducting research on school administrators' perspectives on teaching foster children at the elementary level, with a particular focus on DPS.

You are invited to participate in this research because of your position as a Principal or Assistant Principal at a DPS elementary/middle school. I understand the challenges and rewards associated with delivering on the promise of education to students, particularly those students who are unique in their needs. An overview of this research is noted below. Both Decatur Public School's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Walden University's IRB have approved this research study.

**What am I asking of you?** Because of the recent pandemic, I have had to shift from my original method of a singular, face-to-face interview to an online questionnaire through email. This questionnaire contains approximately ten questions with a few remedial questions and should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. Your responses will be safely stored on a password-protected computer and in a locked filing cabinet. The data from this study will be used in the completion of my doctoral dissertation and may be published or presented at conferences.

**When will the questionnaire become available?** After you confirm your interest to participate through email or phone/text (refer below), you will be sent the questions in a Word document.

**What you will get in return?** Although there is not monetary reward for participation, participants will help fill a research gap in the understanding of principals' and assistant principals' experiences in educating elementary foster students. This research may aid in educational and child welfare practices, policies, and strategies at the state and local levels; may help create an educational service plan unique to this population; and can help promote a better understanding of the environmental and demographic components that have led up to a foster child's educational enrollment and status.

**Do I have to participate?** You are free to accept or turn down the invitation. No one in the educational community or school district will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to be in the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time. Consent is assumed when participants reply to the questionnaire.

**What to do next?** If you are interested in participating or have more questions, please

feel free to contact Tisha Hess by email at xxxx@xxxxx or by phone/text at xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Thank you for your consideration!  
Tisha Hess  
Doctoral Student, Walden University