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Educating Youth in Foster Care: Educators' Perspectives

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EDUCATING YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE: EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES

A Dissertation Presented

by

Preston Randall

to

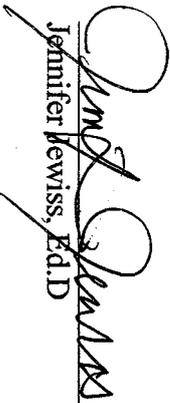
**The Faculty of the Graduate College
of
The University of Vermont**

**In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Education
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies**

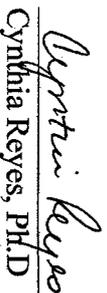
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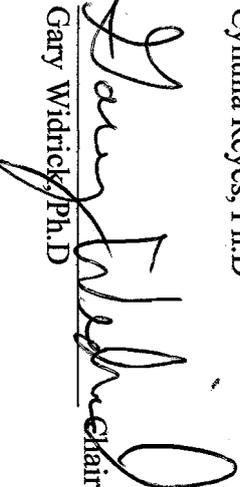
Accepted by the Faculty of the Graduate College, The University of Vermont, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education, specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the education of foster care children through the perspectives of classroom teachers. Numerous studies have found that foster youth experience depressed educational outcomes relative to their peers. A meta-analysis of such studies reported depressed educational outcomes in terms of standardized test scores, grade averages, retention rates, and suspension and expulsion rates (Scher, 2007). Foster care is most often associated with maltreatment, which in turn has been linked to depressed educational outcomes (Runyan, 1985) and to insecure attachment (Howe, 1999). Attachment theory, which emphasizes the impact of relationships in early childhood on future relationships, informed this study. Purposeful sampling was used to identify classroom teachers in a rural Vermont high school that serves a large number of foster youth relative to its size. Participants were selected based on their high degree of experience with and perceived success in supporting students in foster care.

In interviews, teachers were asked to describe distinguishing characteristics of foster youth as well as their relationships with peers and adults while at school. Teachers described several characteristics of foster youth, including the perceived impact of trauma on foster youth's ability to attend to school and school related tasks. Teachers also characterized intense relationships between foster youth and their peers, and between foster youth and adults at school. Participants also identified several strategies they believed to be effective in supporting this population, each of which emphasized the development of caring relationships between teachers and foster youth. Teachers shared concerns about the impact of frequent placement changes on the educational experiences of foster youth. Interviewees also noted that their support of foster youth was hampered by insufficient information about changes in students' status. Intersections between the characteristics of foster youth and selected literature on attachment theory and traumatic stress are explored in the interpretation of the findings. Finally, this study utilizes a feminist ethic of care to contextualize relationships between foster youth in schools and effective teacher strategies.

Dedication

To Nancy, Hannah and Jake. I am lucky to have a wonderfully patient and supportive family. This has been a major undertaking for all of us. Thank You..

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I gratefully acknowledge the work and support of all those who have helped me with this project. Thank you to the wonderful faculty of the School of Education and Social Work at the University of Vermont, especially those who teach in the Educational Leadership and Policy Program. I am especially grateful to the faculty serving on my dissertation committee. Thank you to Dr. Gary Widrick, who graciously agreed to chair my committee, and to Dr. Cynthia Reyes who offered valuable feedback on my proposal helping to ensure that quality data was obtained, and who has continued to offer support and guidance. Thank you to Dr. Susan Hasazi who offered early encouragement with this dissertation topic and who consistently and persistently offered enthusiastic support. Particularly, thank you to my advisor, Dr. Jennifer Jewiss for her patience, thoughtful questions, and tireless reviewing of my work. I have learned much about qualitative research and effective writing thanks to her guidance.

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I am most grateful for my extended family, who instilled in me a belief that education is intrinsically valuable, to be sought as its own end; particularly my parents,

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This study arose from my personal experience as a school counselor working with students in foster care. Further, I had the opportunity as a graduate student at the University of Vermont to conduct interviews for a study about foster youths' preparedness for aging out of the foster care system (MacNeil, 2007). These interviews furthered my interest in exploring the school performance of foster youth. For the purposes of this study the terms foster care, out-of-home placement and state custody are used interchangeably. Each is used to refer to those who typically have been placed by the court system with adults other than their birth parents as a measure designed to ensure the safety of the child. Educational performance refers to any measured school outcome, especially grades, standardized test scores, attendance, retention, and behavior. This chapter reviews the historical context for the study, as well as the findings of other studies, which, taken in sum, indicate depressed educational performance on the part of students being served by the foster care system.

Context

While this study focuses on the educational performance of those being served by child welfare agencies, it is important to understand the historical context of out-of-home care. Out-of-home care in Europe and North America has long been associated with economic mobility and access to opportunity. The relationship between out-of-home care and education or vocational training is long standing. The earliest model of out of home care was indentured servitude where young family members were

indentured for a period of time to work off family debts (Hacsi, 1995). In the best cases, these children learned a trade, similar to an apprenticeship program, which would allow them access to economic opportunity. The first formalized, systematic approach to out of home care in the United States was established by the Children's Aid Society in New York in 1853 (Gish, 1999). Inner city poverty was addressed by sending children to the agrarian Midwest. This program was so effective in creating opportunities for these children that some older children would request that they be served by the children's aid society. Our current foster care system for abused and neglected children traces its roots to these early out of home models that emphasized economic and social mobility.

Our public education system is grounded in the belief that access to education is a vital means to accessing economic mobility. As such, public schools need to serve all students. Schools have specific strategies for many identifiable populations deemed at risk for poor school performance (e.g. students with disabilities, English language learners). Students who are in the foster care system present educators with a unique constellation of needs and risk factors. This study explores the frontlines of education with regards to foster children. Emphasis is given to the classroom as the most immediate intersection between foster youth and education. The research is driven by these essential questions: What observable traits distinguish students in foster care in the eyes of classroom teachers? What strategies do classroom teachers use when working with students in foster care?

Educational Outcomes for Foster Children

Numerous studies provide quantitative data on the educational outcomes of foster youth. These findings are consistent, indicating that children in foster care are at risk for school failure. Measures of school performance include school completion rates, standardized test scores, grade retention, and identification for special education.

Casey Family Programs, a private organization that contracts with state agencies to provide foster placements, is a leader in researching outcomes for children in state's custody. One study report was geared towards raising awareness of the needs of foster youth (Casey Family Programs, 2005). The study reviewed over 650 case records of adults who had been served by foster care agencies in Oregon and Washington and conducted follow-up interviews with nearly 500 participants. The findings raised concerns regarding the educational needs of foster youth, as well as mental health needs and employment and economic outcomes for the study participants. In this study, 84.4% of the participants had earned their high school diploma or received a GED. This compares to an 87.3% completion rate in the general population. Of the participants who completed high school, 28.5% did so through the GED program. This represents a higher percentage of GED participants than found in the general population. Post-secondary program completion rates were also depressed; 16.1% completed a vocational degree and only 1.8% completed a four-year degree in comparison to 24% in the general population. Given the connection between education and economic status (Mankiw, 2007; Rouse, 2005; Schultz, 1961), it is not surprising that employment rates for study participants were lower than the national average (80.1% vs. 95%), household poverty rates were three times the national average, fully one third did not have health insurance (compared to 18% in the general population

within the same age range) and nearly one quarter had experienced homelessness after leaving care (Casey Family Programs, 2005).

Findings from a study consisting of focus group interviews with foster youth, foster parents, educators, and social service professionals (Zetlin, 2006) also raised concerns about the success of foster youth in school. This study found that 30-50% of children in foster care received special education services, compared to 10% of the general population. Because of the perceived intense needs of children in foster care, this study found that schools were more likely to evaluate for special education with the goal of providing additional support for students. While in many instances foster youth are more likely to be identified for special education, a secondary finding showed that high mobility rates and the lack of strong advocacy might result in fewer foster children being identified or delays in their identification for special education services. It is difficult to accurately determine the degree to which foster youth need special education because of both over identification and under identification. What remains clear, according to this study, is that the rate of identification is up to five times that found in the general population.

It is difficult, in the first decade of the 21st century, to avoid the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001", 2008) on education monitoring and reporting. NLCB focuses on standardized test scores as a measure of accountability. Noteworthy for this study is the fact that foster children are not an identified at risk population in reporting test scores. While schools are required to report scores for sub-groups such as low-income students, minority students, and English language learners, the same is not true for children in state's custody. Because

of this, fewer data are available regarding the performance and achievement of foster youth than for other identifiably at risk populations. Using a regression model and a review of the educational records of foster children, one study (Burley & Halpern, 2001) found that foster care status alone was associated with a 7-8% decrease in standardized test scores. Foster youth scored 15-20 points below non-foster youth in statewide tests. Consistent with the Casey Family Program's study (2005), this study found that students in foster care in 11th grade completed high school at a rate of 59% compared to 86% for the general population. Students in foster care were retained at approximately twice the rate of the general population (15% vs. 8% in grade 3 the year of the study, 13% vs. 6% in grade 6, and 15% vs. 7% in grade 9). In findings similar to the Zetlin (2006) study, foster children were identified for special education more than two and a half times the rate of the general population (23% vs. 9% in grade 3, 29% vs. 10% in grade 6, and 24% vs. 8% in grade 9).

The data indicating depressed educational achievement for foster youth are mounting. Using survey data collected biannually over a 6 year period and tracking a cohort of students (beginning their sophomore year) throughout the United States, Wendy Whiting Blome (1997) compared the outcomes of approximately 150 foster youth with a group of non-foster youth matched by gender, race, and abilities in reading and math. This study found that 63% of the foster youth graduated on time compared to 84% of the non-foster youth participants. Within four years of the initial graduation date a total of 77% of the foster youth had received their diploma or GED compared to 93% of the non-foster youth. Of the foster youth, 13% were enrolled in college courses two years after graduating high school compared to 29% of the non-foster youth.

Those numbers rose to 45% and 54% respectively four years after the high school graduation date with foster youth still lagging behind their peers. Foster youth reported earning mostly C's on their high school report cards. The non-foster youth reported earning both B's and C's on their report cards.

In a meta-analysis of 31 studies conducted primarily in the United States (77% of the studies), as well as Great Britain, Canada, France, and Australia, findings reflect similar trends, with foster youth generally faring worse than their peers in terms of educational outcomes (Scheerr, 2007). Foster youth were 7 times as likely as their peers to be retained in school at a rate of 33%. Foster youth were 5 times as likely to qualify for special education at a rate of 31%. Behavior problems plague foster youth in school, resulting in an expulsion rate three times that of the general population. Nearly a quarter of the students in foster care were suspended or expelled from school at least once. Interestingly, this study found that special education identification has increased steadily over the 30 years reviewed, while retention rates and suspension rates peaked in the 1980's and have since declined.

There is some evidence that foster placement is associated with improvements in some school related outcomes for maltreated children. Students in foster care have better attendance at school compared with maltreated youth who remain at home (Runyan & Gould, 1985), where maltreatment refers to any confirmed physical, sexual, emotional abuse, or neglect. The rate of absence improved from 15.6% to 3.48% for youth once placed in a foster home in this historical cohort study. The improved attendance was also associated with an improved grade point average. Youth in foster care maintained a 1.84 grade point average while maltreated youth who remained in

their home maintained a 1.61 grade point average. At the time of the report of maltreatment, 42% of the youth who were placed in foster care had passing grades. That rate improved to 44% for those in care. By contrast, 66% of those who were not placed in care had passing grades at the time of the report of maltreatment. Their passing rate dropped dramatically after the report to 32%. It appears from this study that, while foster placement provides some concrete support, it is insufficient to counter the academic difficulties of maltreated youth.

Problem Statement

Collectively, these studies reveal a critical need to understand the relationship between foster care status and school performance. Students in foster care are an easily identifiable, highly at risk population in our schools. This study asks high school classroom teachers to reflect on their perceptions of, experiences with, and work with foster youth.

Chapter 2

School Performance of Foster Youth

The research cited in Chapter 1 demonstrates that children in foster care are at an increased risk for school failure. While these studies have been consistent in identifying depressed educational outcomes for foster youth, many of the studies documenting this risk have done so from a policy perspective, offering explanations for the school performance of foster children that suggest policy solutions. This dissertation study takes a different approach by focusing on the interactions and relationships of foster youth in the classroom. The latter part of this chapter is devoted to exploring the literature on attachment theory and specifically how maltreatment has been understood in terms of its impact on the formation of attachments. Further, the literature regarding the impact of attachment on schooling is explored. This literature serves as a foundation for the development of the interview protocols used in this study. Before delving into the literature on attachment theory, I briefly review how the problem of school performance for foster youth has been understood, and what solutions that understanding has offered.

Mobility

Students in foster care experience more school transitions than the general population (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shae, 2006). These frequent transitions make it challenging for educators to accurately identify the educational needs of the students in foster care. The Zetlin (2006) study spoke directly to the challenge of accurately determining special education eligibility for students in foster care. Frequent changes in placement for foster youth and the changes in schools

that can accompany these placement changes make it difficult for educators to develop an accurate understanding of the learning profile of an individual student in foster care.

High mobility also creates a challenge for the students in foster care. Each transition between foster homes and schools is often accompanied by a period of absence from school. Enrolling in a new school can be delayed as the new foster parent contacts the school and the appropriate records are located and forwarded to the new school. Students may also miss time in school as they take time to move into a new home. Meetings to develop a permanency plan, and possibly meetings with a judge if it is a court ordered placement change, can accompany such moves. Such meetings further disrupt regular school attendance. In secondary schools where progress is determined by credit accumulation, prolonged absences and transitions mid-marking period can result in the loss of academic credit. Many of the studies included in their recommendations the implementation of policies and practices that would minimize placement disruptions (Alshuler, 2003; Casey Family Programs, 2005; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shae, 2006). Federal policies regarding homeless education have been expanded to include foster children (Homeless, 2006). The McKinney-Vento Act (H.R. 5417) suspends residency requirements for attendance at a public school for homeless and foster children. A primary goal of the act is to minimize school transfers, so that if a child moves into a homeless shelter or foster home in a different district, they are able to continue attending the same school.

Information Sharing

Record keeping is also problematic for foster youth. In a study designed to measure and describe the problem of retrieving the school records of highly mobile foster youth, researchers worked with schools and child welfare agencies to retrieve and review the records of a sample of foster children (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). They found that it took 3 weeks to 8 months to track down school records for the students in the sample. Fewer than 25% of the cumulative files of a random sample of students were readily available. Zetlin and her colleagues found that many of the case files of these students contained inaccurate information regarding which school the child attended. Many of the school files were incomplete. Importantly and problematically, complete and accurate records were least available for those students who had serious learning and behavioral problems.

Other studies focused on the problem of information sharing between educators and social service providers. Consistently criticized was the lack of understanding between schools and social service agencies regarding the limits of confidentiality and the legalities of each system (Alshuler, 2003; Burley & Halpern, 2001; Conger & Finkelstein, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shae, 2006). Burley and Halpern (2001) addressed this issue by advocating for a passport approach. A passport would contain the vital information that should follow a child in the foster care system. Any information required for school enrollment (e.g. special education or disability information, grade level, transcript information), important contact information, information regarding the status of the biological parents' rights and current placement information would be included in a single document that could easily be accessed by social workers, school officials, and foster parents.

Tension Between Social Service and Education Systems

Studies reveal a persistent tension between schools and social service agencies. Neither trusts that the other is authentically looking out for the child's best interest (Alshuler, 2003; Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shae, 2006). Sandra Alshuler's study (2003) utilizing focus group with caseworkers, educators, and students offers a thorough description of the tension between schools and social service agencies.

Alshuler (2003) found that both caseworkers and educators expressed distrust of the other. Communication between schools and agencies was often slow and incomplete. Each group blamed the other for the patterns of miscommunication and non-communication. Both groups expressed doubt that the other group was effective in carrying out their professional responsibilities. Caseworkers did not trust that educators maintained high academic expectations for foster youth. Educators, in turn, felt caseworkers were unreliable and made assumptions about how well the children were doing in school. Both the students and the educators questioned the level of commitment or caring demonstrated by caseworkers. This study emphasized the need for a collaborative atmosphere between the schools and the social service agencies. There was unanimous agreement among study participants that, in schools where caseworkers were made to feel welcome, information sharing was more consistent and timely. The study concludes that cross training would be helpful in developing a shared understanding of the respective roles of educators and caseworkers.

Attachment Theory: An Overview

This dissertation study differentiates itself from the bulk of the literature in that it utilizes the theoretical framework of attachment theory to inform the questions it asks

about the functioning of foster youth in school. Attachment theory grounds this inquiry, focusing questions on observed interactions rather than measured outcomes to explore ways in which foster care status may influence educational processes.

Developmental psychology emphasizes stages in human development in understanding psychological function. It defines normal development in terms of tasks done during certain stages of development, and understands psychological problems in terms of interruptions to the completion of these tasks. As a model of developmental psychology, attachment theory is well situated to describe the impact of maltreatment on the developing child. Attachment theory offers an understanding of how maltreatment (physical, sexual, and/or emotional abuse) impacts behaviors, and especially relationships later in life. In the discussion that follows, I begin with an overview of attachment theory, followed by a review of the findings regarding the impact of maltreatment on attachment style. Next, I look at how the attachment style translates into behavior, motivation, and relationships. I discuss the possible impact of these behaviors, motivations and relationship styles on school performance. I consider resiliency theory as a framework congruent with attachment theory. Finally, I briefly look at the recent application of neuroscience to the social sciences, offering further supporting evidence for an attachment-based understanding of school performance.

Attachment theory focuses on the development of attachments in early childhood (infancy to age 3) with the child's primary caregiver. Through the interactions between the primary caregiver and the young child, an internal working model of relationships is developed which informs the fundamental assumptions the child holds about their own self-worth, their ability to rely on others, and their security

in the world (Goldberg, 2000). This internal working model is the basis for affect regulation (comfort seeking behaviors). Early research on attachment was conducted by observing young children's reactions to stressful situations in the *strange situation evaluation* (Ainsworth & Witting, 1969). Situations included having the primary caregiver leave the child alone with the researcher/stranger. Observations were made of the child's response to this stressful event, and the child's reaction when the caregiver returned. Based on these observations, Bowlby developed four distinct attachment styles: secure, avoidant, resistant/ambivalent, and disorganized/disoriented (Holmes, 2001).

Secure Attachment

Secure attachment is the result of responsive care giving. Through these interactions affect attunement (sensitivity to the emotions or affect of others) is developed (Hughes, 2004). Affect attunement is central to the development of affect regulation (having control over one's emotions and their expression). The caregiver reflects and co-constructs meaning of the infant or young child's feelings. The child sees emotion reflected in the face of his/her caregiver. In sharing affect, the caregiver helps the child develop a secure attachment and a strong, positive, integrated self identity. The process of attunement provides scaffolding which helps the child develop a growing understanding of the diversity of feelings he/she experiences, allowing the child to integrate a broad range of affective states into a sense of self. Together, the caregiver and child regulate affect through times of stress, helping the child to develop internal affect regulation. In the observations made by Ainsworth (Holmes, 2001), the securely attached infant/child was able to tolerate the stress of separation and continue

with play and exploration. When the primary caregiver returned, the child acknowledged the return with smiles, and may have offered an invitation to the caregiver to join in his/her play and exploration. Infants and caregivers are constantly communicating through non-verbal cues. The child was effective in regulating the affect associated with the anxiety of separation, and drawing on the positive sense of self, was able to continue with play and exploration. The internal working model for those with secure attachments is one of self-competence and one where others can be counted on for support and caring.

In middle childhood (ages 6 – 12) physical contact with the attachment figure (primary caregiver) is less central in regulating affect. Comfort may be achieved by reconnecting with the secure base using the telephone or a photograph. Securely attached children in middle childhood demonstrate the ability to name and recognize emotions they are having. They express trust in care-giving adults beyond their primary caregiver. In a narrative assessment, a clinician offers the start of a story to the client. The client is assessed based on how he/she completes the narrative. The securely attached child completes stories with positive resolutions (the children complete stories offering happy but realistic endings), and the stories are coherent and congruent (Kerns & Richardson, 2005).

In adulthood, secure attachment is marked by coherent and engaging dialog, a valuing of attachments to other important people in their lives and an ability to describe any individual event or relationship with some objectivity. When describing or evaluating an attachment related experience, the style and engagement in the

description is consistent, and evaluation criteria are also consistent, regardless of whether or not the experience was positive or negative (Holmes, 2001).

Insecure-Avoidant Attachment

Primary caregivers of avoidant infants were described as rejecting (Goldberg, 2000). Avoidant attachment is the result of inconsistent and generally slow, or non-responsiveness from the primary caregiver. While these caregivers had positive feelings about their child, these feelings were often overcome by anger and/or irritation. The internal working model of avoidant individuals emphasizes the unreliability of others. It is grounded in an assumption that others do not reliably care about him/her, and that negative feelings are weaknesses. There is a belief that relationships need to be manipulated because being cared for is not guaranteed. Young children with an avoidant attachment style repress negative emotions, having learned that the non-responsive caregiver will dismiss these emotions. Avoidant children organize their behaviors with the goal of proximity to their caregiver. They desire security and connection with their secure base (caregiver) and have strategies to maintain this connection. These strategies include repressing negative affect, manipulating their own affect, and when possible, the affect of their caregiver to maintain that connection. In the *strange situation evaluation* with infants, the youngsters play, but with a marked lack of feeling or enthusiasm. When the primary caregiver leaves the child with a stranger, the child acts as though he/she did not notice, displaying indifference. When the caregiver returns, the apparent indifference remains. The child will not attempt to engage the caregiver, and may even look away (Howe, 1999).

In middle childhood, avoidant attachment styles continue to be marked by low self-esteem and a belief that the primary caregiver is unloving and disinterested. As reported by peers, avoidant children are lacking in social skills. They lack pro-social tendencies such as sharing and empathy. They are unresponsive to the needs of their peers, mirroring the unresponsive style of their primary caregiver. Peers also describe the avoidant child as lacking agency. The self-reliance they developed in response to the apparent indifference of their parents does not translate into a strong sense of agency. This is likely because self-advocating behaviors require pro-social behaviors. Without a strong coherent sense of self, the avoidantly-attached child cannot project that self into social interactions (Kerns & Richardson, 2005).

In adulthood, what was characterized as avoidant attachment has been re-termed as dismissing attachment. These adults are dismissing of their attachment-related experiences and relationships. When they speak of their attachment experiences (for instance, of their relationship with their mother) they speak in broad general terms, focusing on what is normal, rather than accurately describing details of their own experience. Oftentimes their representations of attachment relationships contradict the events they recount. In narrative assessments, their descriptions are markedly brief, indicating a lack of substantive detail, offering instead the generalities of what is stereotypically “normal” (Holmes, 2001).

Insecure-Resistant/Ambivalent Attachment

Similar to avoidant attachment, resistant or ambivalent attachment is marked by insecurity in the responsiveness of the primary caregiver. Where the caregiver of the avoidant child lacked apparent commitment or interest, the caregiver of the resistant

child is significantly deficit in communicating interest and commitment. The primary caregivers of resistant infants are insensitive to the infant's signals but not rejecting. They show little or no spontaneous affection and seem uncomfortable or unskilled with physical contact. In the *strange situation evaluation*, the resistant young child may appear wary even before the separation. They are less engaged in play and exploration (Holmes, 2001). These children maximize their attachment seeking behavior in order to overcome the caregiver's neglect. They display distress when the caregiver leaves them (crying, clinging, tantrums) and wait impatiently for the caregiver's return. Upon return, the caregiver is greeted by more of the same: an insistence that the caregiver attend to them immediately. These children do not accept the comfort of the caregiver, but continue to demand comforting even after it has been offered and provided. The internal working model is grounded in a belief that one is not worthy of care so that one needs to exaggerate the expressions of need to elicit a response. Exaggerated feelings of negative emotions (often sorrow and anger) are used to manipulate the caregiver so that reassuring attachment behaviors are offered (Howe, 1999).

In middle childhood, organized strategies of manipulation remain central to the relationship style of the resistant/ambivalent child. They display anger and aggression. They threaten others with their feelings, often threatening either an angry response, or threatening to stop caring and to withdraw emotionally from the relationship. They have strong moods and can collapse into despair, feeling unloved and helpless (Howe, 1999). Relationships with peers are marked by extreme neediness and insecurity. Often there is a crisis or drama at the center of which is the resistant child. This crisis

is an attempt to secure the support and attention of their friends, teachers, and/or caregivers.

In adulthood the resistant/ambivalent style is renamed preoccupied, reflecting the individual's preoccupation with past attachment relationships and experiences. In narrative assessments, the preoccupied adult offers long sentences that lack structure and grammar, and congruent, clear content. The adult speaks with anger, passivity, or fear (Holmes, 2001). Relationships continue to be marked by manipulation and overdependence on others. There is an expression of distrust in the authenticity of others' affection: no one loves the preoccupied adult as strongly or as completely as they love others (Howe, 1999). They need, but do not trust others. Preoccupied adults can be controlling in relationships in an effort to ensure their security. Issues of co-dependence are fitting with this attachment style.

Insecure-Disorganized Attachment

Disorganized attachment is most often associated with childhood trauma and maltreatment, as well as with being parented by a caregiver with major mental health and/or substance abuse issues. In contrast to the insecure attachment styles of avoidant and resistant, the disorganized individual has no organized behavioral strategy to regulate their affect or connect with their caregiver. These individuals are unable to adapt their behavior to the care-giving relationship (Howe, 1999). In the *strange situation*, disorganized infants may freeze with their hands in the air, holding a trance-like expression. They may initially respond to the parent's return, but then lay on the floor. The young, disorganized child may simultaneously cling to the parent and cry, while leaning away gazing elsewhere (Holmes, 2001). The internal working model

emphasizes a negative self-view and a concept of others that is marked by fear and uncertainty. The internal working model is limited in that it simply doesn't work. There is no model for the relationships of the disorganized individual because others are frightening, unpredictable, and unavailable.

In middle childhood anger often becomes a central strategy. Anger is associated with strength and is predictable (Howe, 1999). Because of the perpetual state of anxiety that results from being unable to seek caring support, the disorganized child lacks time and energy to engage with peers, to explore, and to play. They struggle to identify their own emotions and the emotions of others. This results in frequent misunderstandings and mis-managed social situations. Various emotional states are confused so that when the child is feeling one thing, they display another; sorrow may become anger. In a self-protective effort, the child with disorganized attachment projects blame outwardly. Aggression might be misdirected at irrelevant or non-responsible figures such as animals or the self. In an effort to resolve the conflict of having been mistreated by a caregiver, but remaining attached to that caregiver, the child will assume they are worthless and the parent is faultless.

In adulthood, disorganized attachment has been linked to dissociation. The dichotomy between attachment and mistreatment seen in the child who perceives himself as worthless and the parent as perfect becomes unbearable and cannot be resolved leading to dissociation. There are multiple selves, allowing the same relationship to have multiple meanings (Bacon & Richardson, 2001). In the narrative assessment, much of the narration matches the other attachment styles, but inconsistently. The narrative sometimes matches the avoidant style, sometimes the

secure style, and other times the preoccupied styles. At times, however, the discourse is marked by the absence of reasoning monitoring. The adult will make unreasonable causal statements. There may be periods of prolonged silence or eulogistic speech (Holmes, 2001).

Attachment and Maltreatment

Attachment is a function of the relationship between the primary caregiver and the infant. Maltreatment (neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and/or sexual abuse) impacts attachment style (Bacon & Richardson, 2001). The primary caregiver typically serves as a secure base for the young child. In times of stress, the child reconnects with that secure base as a survival mechanism to manage and endure the stressful situation. The strange situation scenario is an effective measure of attachment because it creates a stressful situation to which the young child responds. It is not surprising, then, that if that secure base is unresponsive in the case of neglect, or the direct source of a threat or stress in the case of physical abuse, the child develops an insecure attachment style. In situations where the primary caregiver is not the threat, but fails to protect the child from a threat, security is not provided. This also can lead to an insecure attachment style.

Disorganized attachment has been most frequently and closely associated with neglect. In one study, over 80% of maltreated infants were described as having disorganized attachment behaviors versus 20% of infants in the control group (Goldberg, 2000). Goldberg cites another study which found that attachment styles persisted into years 3 and 4, where again 80% of maltreated 3 year olds were found to have insecure attachment and 93% of maltreated 4 year olds. Researchers have

observed the need to study the possible correlations between the type of maltreatment and the resulting specific insecure attachment style (Baer & Martinez, 2006).

In cross-cultural comparative studies, descriptions and characteristics of secure and insecure attachment styles remain consistent (Howe, 1999) indicating that attachment is not a culturally bound construct. Furthermore, barring unusual and dramatic events, the attachment style developed in early childhood persists through adulthood (Goldberg, 2000). The negative impact of maltreatment on attachment is enduring.

Attachment and School

Schools are fundamentally social places, and learning in school is often a structured, social activity. Students are constantly interacting with peers whether it is working together on a group or class project assigned by the teacher, or self-initiated on the playground and in the lunchroom. Schools provide an early opportunity for children to form a relationship with an adult outside of the home. For some students, kindergarten may represent the first opportunity to form an attachment relationship with someone other than the primary caregiver. Several studies have documented the correlation between attachment style and the relationships children develop at school (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). Others have linked these relationships to school engagement and performance (Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997; Toth & Cicchetti, 1996).

At the same age that children are starting school, they are beginning to seek attachments with others outside of the family. Through middle childhood and adolescence, the importance of peer relationships is ever increasing (Kerns & Richardson, 2005; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1997). A student's sense of security becomes

ried to friendships in addition to, and eventually to a greater degree than, attachment to the primary caregiver. However, the internal working model developed with the primary caregiver continues to color these future attachments.

A strong sense of self-worth is closely associated with the development of secure friendships (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). Booth-LaForce et al. (in Kerns & Richardson, 2005) found that attachment security with parents was closely correlated to friendship quality, and that self-worth was a significant mediator. A well-developed sense of self-worth established in the parent-child bond serves as a strong foundation to quality friendships. Quality friendships were found to compensate for a low sense of security in the primary caregiver bond, but in such cases, quality friendships are less likely to develop because of low self-worth. Self-worth is a correlate of secure attachment.

Social withdrawal from and aggression towards peers has been linked to the disorganized attachment style (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). Because children with a disorganized attachment style do not feel they can competently engage in peer relationships, they shift between fight and flight behaviors (withdraw and aggression). Thus, it is not surprising that children in foster care have a higher number of reported behavioral issues in school (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007). Attachment style may help to explain why nearly 25% of foster youth have been suspended or expelled during their school career in comparison with 7% of the general population (Scherr, 2007).

Behavior problems are one manifestation of insecure attachment observable in the school setting. One study began with an assessment of children's attachments at age six and concluded with an academic performance assessment at age eight (Kerns &

Richardson, 2005). In this study insecurely attached children scored lower on communication, cognitive engagement, and mastery motivation. Toth and Cicchetti (1996) found that maltreated children had lower ego-resistance than did non-maltreated children. Ego resistance describes an individual's ability to maintain a healthy self-image when facing difficult challenges or experiencing criticism and/or failure. School requires a form of risk-taking, where students are constantly subjecting themselves to feedback, including criticism, in their academic work. Reduced ego-resistance, a function of insecure attachment, makes such risk-taking especially challenging.

Insecurely attached students' relationships with their teachers can serve as a strong counterbalance, improving educational outcomes (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). If the teacher is able to serve as a secure base for the student, the risk-taking associated with learning becomes increasingly possible. While the teacher-student relationship is not the same as a primary caregiver-child relationship, the teacher can serve as a base for affect regulation. Students with a strong relationship with their teacher can connect with the teacher (e.g. have a conversation, ask a question, or simply be near the teacher) to increase their ability to tolerate stress and manage their emotional responses. The powerful impact of the student-teacher relationship was further documented in a study which found that peer relations at school were best predicted by the student's relationship with the teacher (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). When students had a strong relationship with the teacher, they often maintained strong and supportive peer relationships. Given the high correlation between disorganized attachment and behavioral issues, and in turn the correlation between maltreatment and disorganized

attachment, serious obstacles stand between maltreated students and a strong relationship with their teachers.

Further Support for Attachment Perspective

Resiliency Theory

Resilience is the successful adaptation of the individual to overcome adversity (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006). Adversity is understood to be significant trauma or hardship. Children placed into foster care have usually experienced some form of hardship or trauma that resulted in the state taking custody of the child. Resiliency theory has been applied as a framework to examine programming for children and youth (e.g. the development of after school programs, mentoring programs, and supportive programs in schools) and to better understand the outcomes for youth in state's custody. More resilient youth fare better (Fernandez, 2006). They are able to overcome adversity more easily, are less likely to use illegal drugs, are more likely to continue in school, and are less likely to be involved in the legal system. There is a substantial body of work devoted to researching the implications of resiliency theory and its application to child welfare (see, for example, Benard, 2004; Brooks, 2006; Fernandez, 2006; Henderson & Benard, 2007; Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006; Richardson, 2002; Search-Institute, 2010). This body of work informs practitioners who seek to improve outcomes by promoting resiliency in child welfare clientele.

Resilient individuals are typically socially competent, resourceful, and autonomous (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006). They are able to problem solve with a sense of independence but are not isolated. Resilient individuals are able to interact effectively with others, increasing their access to resources (Richardson, 2002).

Individual resiliency is understood in terms of risk factors and protective factors. These factors are categorized in terms of the individual, family, school, and community arenas (Brooks, 2006; Search-Institute, 2010). Examples of individual risk factors include: difficult temperament, behavior problems, learning disability, peers who are involved with substance abuse, and early anti-social behaviors. Family risk factors include: critical and/or inconsistent parenting, abusive or conflict-ridden family, low parental monitoring of the child, and the presence of alcohol or drug abuse. Many of the children served by child welfare programs, especially those placed in out-of-home care, are exposed to some or all of these risk factors. School and community risk factors include a high student/teacher ratio, high demands with insufficient supports at school, poverty in the community, and high mobility rates to name a few. The high mobility associated with foster care is a risk factor that may impact the resiliency of these youth. (For a more complete list of risk factors see Klein, Kufeldt & Rideout, 2006.)

Protective factors help compensate for risk factors. Both risk and protective factors have a cumulative effect; the more risk factors, the lower the resiliency; the more protective factors, the greater the resiliency (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006). Key protective factors on the individual level include: self-reliance, internal locus of control, sense of purpose, future orientation, and strong self-image. Family protective factors include: non-authoritarian parenting, positive attitude towards the child's education, and encouragement of child involvement in decision making. Especially pertinent to this study are the school protective factors: caring and supportive teachers, compassion, respect, opportunity for involvement, and high but achievable standards (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006).

The mentoring movement has strong ties to resiliency theory because of the strong protective factor of caring adult relationships (Fernandez, 2006). According to Fernandez, outcomes for children and youth in out-of-home care are directly related to the strength of their relationships with adults. Because these children do not have strong familial relationships, what would otherwise be seen as peripheral or secondary relationships become significantly more important. The relationship with a teacher, a mentor, a coach, or a neighbor may become a critical protective factor in terms of the child's resiliency. Similarly, the influence of peer relationships is often greater for these children (Fernandez, 2006).

In her 5-year longitudinal study, Elizabeth Fernandez (2006) found that children in the foster care system frequently reported having difficulty with concentration and attention. All of the children in her study reported anxiety symptoms. This anxiety may be attributable to the trauma experienced by youth, and by the unpredictability of life in foster care (Fernandez, 2006). Placement changes frequently are accompanied by school changes, both of which inhibit the development of caring relationships with adults.

Research of Traumatic and/or Complex Stress

The application of attachment theory in understanding the lives of children in state's custody is central to this study. Its relevance is supported by the identification of caring adult relationships as a protective factor in resiliency theory. The relevancy of relationships is further supported by some authors in the fields of neuroscience and complex trauma, who offer linkages between attachment and the impact early childhood experiences have on the structural development of the brain (Cicchetti, 2002;

Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003; Van der Kolk, 2005; Lee & Hoaken, 2007). Child abuse and severe neglect can impact the physiology of the brain. Severe neglect can also impair both the emotional and cognitive development of children (Cicchetti, 2002; Debellis, 2005; Haight, Kagle, & Black, 2003). Simply put, according to these researchers, children who have been abused and/or neglected have experienced altered brain development, which has a long lasting impact on their ability to build relationships. Caring, therapeutic, long lasting relationships can help to heal or compensate for the altered brain development (Cicchetti, 2002). However, the mobility associated with foster care may inhibit the development of these relationships.

Application to this Study

This study grounds itself in attachment theory as a framework for understanding the lower academic achievement of students in foster care; students who by definition have been subject to various forms of maltreatment such as neglect, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. Individuals who have been maltreated have different strategies for managing and regulating anxiety. These strategies are dysfunctional in that they are rooted in withdrawal and isolation, manipulation, and/or unpredictability. Maltreatment most often results in insecure attachment styles, which limit the individual's ability to develop meaningful and trusting relationships.

This study posits that understanding the impact of maltreatment on social behaviors is central to understanding the performance of foster youth in school. Learning is a risk-taking behavior. One must acknowledge a weakness (absence of knowledge) for learning to occur. Attachment theory explains the impact maltreatment has on an individual's ability to internalize security and thereby manage and regulate

stress responses. Further, attachment theory explains the impact of maltreatment on an individual's ability to engage in and manage relationships. I included a brief discussion of resiliency because it emphasizes the positive impact of adult relationships in supporting the internal resources of a child to endure and overcome hardships. It offers a supporting theoretical framework that complements the explanations offered by attachment theory. While brain development research is still in its infancy with regards to the impact of maltreatment and trauma, here too we see signs of support for the notion that maltreatment results in relational challenges and heightened states of anxiety.

Attachment theory provides a foundation for the questions asked in this study. In asking educators to describe the challenges students in foster care face in school, and the interactions and interventions used by these educators, this study asks educators to begin to describe, in terms of school relationships, distinguishing characteristics of foster youth. The study asks teachers about specific support strategies used with foster youth with some emphasis on the relationships the teachers build with foster youth.

Chapter 3

Methodology

I am a high school counselor. My interest in the educational outcomes of students in foster care has developed as I work with a number of students who are, or have been, in foster care. My strong identity as a counselor has informed both my research questions and my methodology. As a school counselor, I am uniquely positioned within the school system, focusing simultaneously on issues of psychological and emotional development and on education.

This study examines the perspectives of classroom teachers who work with students in foster care. Through interviews, teachers are asked to reflect on their experiences with foster youth. The study seeks to develop an understanding of the observable traits that distinguish students in foster care in the eyes of classroom teachers and the important teacher attitudes, understandings, and behaviors that are perceived as effective when working with students in foster care. It is an exploratory research project (Patton, 2002) because little work has been done focusing on educators' understanding of and response to the unique constellation of needs presented by students in foster care.

While not purely phenomenological in its approach, the study bears some of the characteristics of such studies. Patton (2002) states that phenomenology seeks answers to the question, "What is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?" (p. 132). This study seeks to describe the lived experience of educators in their work with foster children.

Constructivist in perspective (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), the study is designed to uncover

the meanings constructed by professional educators regarding the relationships students in the foster care system have with peers and adults at school. Further, this research seeks to explore the response these educators have to the phenomenon. This study seeks to uncover the understandings educators bring to their work with foster youth and the efforts teachers make to support the academic achievement of foster youth.

A constructivist research perspective is consistent with my academic and professional background. Early in my undergraduate work in the humanities I was introduced to the distinction between the “Truth” and “truths.” As I studied comparative religion, I was trained to look for the truths of a given culture and set of religious beliefs, rather than to seek a singular religious truth. As a counselor, I work with high school students as they struggle to identify their truths and create meaning from their experiences. My background is well suited to qualitative questions such as those asked in this study.

I am a constructivist (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) in that I believe that a primary task for each of us is to create meaning in our lives. This closely parallels my work as a counselor, working with high school students and their personal narratives.

“Qualitative researchers seek to make sense of personal narratives and the ways in which they intersect” (Glesne, 2006). As a fledgling researcher, I drew on my counseling and humanities background to work with educators as they both discover the truths they bring to their work with students in foster care, and as they create meaning within the structure of this study. In addition, I work with many foster youth each year, and want to increase my own understanding of the interactions between students in foster care and schools.

Site Selection

This study is not a case study. However, the literature on case studies provided strong guidance in selecting the site for this project. In case study research, “The researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting a case of some typicality but leaning toward those cases that seem to offer opportunity to learn” (Stake, 2005). In finding a suitable site for this study, I sought a high school that is in many ways typical of Vermont high schools in size and setting. The study site is a union high school serving 6 towns in rural northern Vermont. The school serves approximately 650 students each year (Newamerica.net, 2008). Demographics for the region served by the school are similar to state demographics in terms of racial and ethnic composition and unemployment rate. The median income for that county is lower than the state average (\$39,536 compared to \$44,546 statewide).

While similar to many rural Vermont high schools demographically, the selected school is unique in that a local, non-profit organization provides strong support for foster families in the area. This organization provides extensive respite support for foster families. Foster youth are able to spend time (i.e. a weekend) with a respite family to ease stress and/or conflict between the foster youth and the foster family. This practice may help the families to persist for long periods of time in the difficult task of fostering children. The school has also received grants to expand supports for students, including offering multiple pathways to graduation, such as alternative programs, employment based education, and service learning. There is a greater concentration of foster children in this community, which one school counselor suggested may be a result of the many supports available in the community and at the

school. As a point of reference, this school has twice the concentration of students in foster care as the high school in which I work. Both schools served approximately 15 students in foster care at the time of the study. However, this site's student population is approximately half that of the high school where I am a school counselor (629 students compared to 1199 (high-schools.com)). Because of the increased density, this site offers an important opportunity to learn about the interaction between students in foster care and schools. Educators in this school are likely to have more frequent and recent interactions with students in foster care than teachers in other settings. Each of the participating teachers had at least two and as many as fifteen students in foster care in their classrooms at the time of the study. The depth and persistence of the teachers' experience with foster youth makes this an information rich site (Patton, 2002) for this study.

Extreme or deviant case sampling is a form of purposeful sampling that allows the researcher to take advantage of information rich cases (Patton, 2002). Such cases do not represent the norm, or a statistically average sample. In this study, broad representation of teacher perspectives and experiences is exchanged in favor of greater intensity in the experiences of the teachers. These teachers have a wealth of experience on which to draw when reflecting on the distinguishing characteristics of foster youth. The participating teachers have also had many opportunities to discover and practice effective support strategies for foster youth. Because this is an exploratory study, such an information rich setting allows this study to focus on the phenomenon in a setting where educators confront the challenges of educating students in foster care regularly in their career.

Through my doctoral coursework at the University of Vermont, I had the opportunity to conduct a preliminary study in this school system, interviewing the superintendent, a school counselor, and a special educator. Through this process I learned that a special educator had been hired to serve as a case manager exclusively to foster youth receiving special education services in the school. This position is grant funded at the state level rather than funded by local tax revenues. State funding for the position recognizes the fact that foster youth are more likely to receive special education services than their peers (30-50% of foster youth receive services compared to 10% in the general population according to one Washington study (Zetlin, 2006)) and that the school had a comparatively high concentration of foster youth. The high number of students in foster care and the special education needs of this population created an added burden to the local tax base for educational support services, which was offset by the creation of this state funded special educator position. The findings of my preliminary study indicated that this is a school system that has considered and tried to address the impact that serving many foster students has on the school and its budget. This dissertation study uncovers the consideration given by teachers to the challenge of meeting the educational needs of foster youth in the classroom.

Qualitative research asks the researcher to carefully consider the benefits and risks associated with his/her previous knowledge about the subject (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). In selecting a school for the study, I carefully considered my familiarity with the study site. A high school was selected because it is a setting familiar to me as a high school counselor. My familiarity served three primary functions. First, conducting a study in a context that is familiar to me helped me frame interview

questions. I am familiar with the roles and responsibilities classroom teachers typically have in high schools. I have a professional understanding of peer relationships in high school and of the relationships high school teachers typically have with their students. I am familiar with the support systems common in a public high school. Second, familiarity supported the development of rapport (Glesne, 2006) with study participants. I was able to use our shared experience with teenagers as a foundation for the researcher-participant relationship. My understanding of school systems and the professional language and terminology found in high schools eased communication with participants and further supported the development of rapport. Third, findings from this study have direct application to my own work. I engaged in the interviews and in the research process, in part, because it was directly relevant to my own work. I am a researcher-practitioner, and as such, I am motivated by a desire to increase my own professional knowledge. I chose a high school in which I have not worked. This allowed me to maintain a singular role as a researcher.

Research provides strong documentation of the challenges facing youth who age out of foster care (exit state's custody as independent adults, rather than reuniting as dependents with their biological families or leaving custody through adoption). These challenges include homelessness, unemployment, and persistent poverty (Goerge, Bilaver, & Lee, 2002; Lenz-Rashid, 2006; MacNeil, 2007; Casey Family Services, 2001; Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). For a review of this literature see MacNeil (2007). Education is a key component in preparing youth for successful transition to adulthood. High school students were prioritized for this study because of

their proximity to adulthood. The impending independence of these students creates a sense of urgency for their educational success.

Data Collection

Data collection in qualitative studies can take many forms (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). Interviews are commonly used in qualitative studies and are the data source for this study.

Using a purposeful sample (sampling which is aimed at insight rather than empirical generalization about the phenomenon (Patton, 2002)), participant selection emphasized identifying classroom teachers who were perceived as having particular interest and/or effectiveness in working with foster youth. Data collection began with semi-structured individual interviews with a school administrator and a school counselor with a primary goal of identifying classroom teachers who would be able to provide insights about foster youth. Teachers were identified based on their interest in, and experience and effectiveness with, foster youth as perceived by the school administrator and counselor.

These interviews also served to orient the researcher to the study site. The administrator was asked about structural supports and professional development specific to this population. The counselor was asked about needs that have been consistently identified and the support the school offers these students and their teachers. These interviews provided me with an understanding of the context in which the educators, the primary data source, work. Information gleaned from these interviews oriented me to the study site. No data specific to the functioning of students in foster care and their school relationships were gathered in these interviews. A copy

of the interview protocols for the administrator and counselor interviews are found in Appendix C.

The Participants

The primary purpose of the administrator and counselor interviews was participant selection. The administrator and counselor were asked to identify classroom teachers who have a high degree of experience with, interest in, and success with children in foster care. Twelve teachers were identified. The counselor provided the names of seven teachers. The administrator confirmed this list and added five more names. The counselor and administrator emphasized the quality of the relationships these teachers had with all of their students and with foster students in particular. They identified these teachers as supportive and confirmed that they knew of specific foster youth who had enjoyed and/or been successful in classes taught by these teachers. The identified teachers were well positioned, according to the counselor and administrator, to provide insight about foster youth in school.

I contacted the 12 identified teachers over the course of one week. Three teachers did not return my calls. A total of nine teachers participated, four male teachers and five female teachers. Participants included teachers from each of the traditional academic disciplines (Math, Science, English and Social Studies) as well as Fine Arts, Special Education, and a teacher who teaches in a support program for regular education students. The participants' years of teaching ranged from 3 to 30 years. Four of the participants had been teaching for more than 10 years.

Building Rapport with Participants

Being a counselor is central to my identity and has influenced the conduct of this study. Because I am a school counselor, I found it relatively easy to quickly build rapport with the participants in this study. There is a commonality to our respective identities as educators. That common ground served as a foundation for the interview relationships that emerged. Strong rapport with the participants allowed me to follow-up on comments with probing questions, and I believe, allowed the participants to feel heard and understood in a way that may not have been possible had someone with a different background conducted the interviews.

However, the ease of developing rapport had its drawbacks. I conducted the bulk of each round of interviews in a single day, moving about the school from one teacher to another during the time they had for lesson planning and preparation during the day. Having met with three teachers in the morning of my first day of interviews, I took a break for lunch and left the school. As I was driving, I was struck by how much I was enjoying my interactions with the teachers I had met. I also found myself concerned that the interviews might have strayed, at times, into dialog, discourse, or conversation. Had I strayed from my researcher role? The teachers had questions about the function of a guidance counselor with respect to students in foster care: what information about students in foster care did a counselor have? Do I tell my colleagues that a student is in foster care? What do I think the counselors should do when a student in foster care transitions to the school part way through the school year with regards to supporting the teachers who receive these students in their classrooms? I did my best to give very general answers, and to persistently, doggedly, maintain that the school in which I work is a different place, with different people, and at times different

systems in place. I worked to reorient myself and the interviewee to my role as a researcher. At the same time, I did not feel comfortable ignoring their questions or maintaining a sterile stance where I held strong to the interview guide and did not allow the participants latitude to raise their own questions about educating foster youth. When I began to code my data, my first step was to review each interview transcription looking only at what I said and asked. I looked for variance that would indicate I had crossed the line from researcher to participant. I was relieved to find that, while I was engaged, at times, in dialog with the participants, my focus and questions remained true to the study and my responses neutral to such a degree that they did not appear to lead the participants in their thoughts or responses.

A second strength I brought to the interview process as a counselor was my approach to asking questions. Counselors are trained to ask probing, direct questions while maintaining and communicating a stance of openness to whatever answer is offered. It is a critical skill in effective counseling. It is also a critical skill for a researcher conducting interviews: to respond with genuine interest and engagement, while not making any judgment or offering opinion. Both the counselor and the researcher are in positions of power with regard to their role: the counselor because of the intimacy and vulnerability intrinsic to the work of counseling, the researcher because of the expertise and degree of control over the study content and process. In both instances, the interviewee is vulnerable to judgment.

While all of the participants were appreciative of my assurances of confidentiality, one interviewee asked on three or more occasions, “This is all confidential, right?” Addressing concerns about confidentiality was another area where

my identity as a counselor was helpful. First, it was helpful because the participants, well aware that I am a school counselor, could have confidence in my understanding of and respect for confidentiality. As educators, they understand that I deal with sensitive and confidential information daily. Explaining confidentiality, its limits (I cannot make promises for what others may say or do), and assuring others of the confidential nature of our interactions are well within my skill set as a counselor. It is a skill that translated well into the field as a qualitative researcher.

The Interview Process

Seven of the participating teachers were interviewed individually three times. Two others were interviewed twice, as scheduling conflicts prohibited a third interview. Interviews started in May 2009 and were, with two exceptions, conducted during or immediately after the school day. The design called for three interviews of 20 to 30 minutes in recognition of the time constraints classroom teachers face during the school day. Each successive round of interviews occurred three weeks to one month after the preceding interview. This schedule provided the teachers with time to reflect on the prior interview and to make new observations with the heightened awareness that may have been prompted by the previous interview(s). They then had the opportunity to share new or refined ideas in subsequent interviews. At the start of each successive interview I reviewed key points raised across the interviewee pool in the preceding interview for member checking. Member checking is the sharing of themes and analytic thoughts with study participants (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002) as a means of insuring that the findings accurately represent the thoughts and experiences of the participants. Most of the interviews occurred during teachers'

preparation periods during the school day. They were asked to shift focus from the daily tasks associated with teaching to reflect on their experiences with students in foster care. In addition to checking my understanding of the teachers' perspectives, the opportunity to revisit ideas from preceding interviews allowed the teachers more time to reflect on the questions in addition to providing member checking during early phases of data analysis.

The data collection process is outlined in the Data Collection Table (Table 3.1) below. The table reflects the timing of the interviews, which participants were included in each round of interviews, and the purpose of the interviews.

Table 3.1: Data Collection Table

<i>Chronology</i>	<i>Data Type</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
April 13, 2009	Individual Interview	1 School Administrator	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop researcher's understanding of the school and context of study 2. Identify potential participants based on perceived interest and effectiveness with students in foster care
April 13, 2009	Individual Interview	1 School Counselor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop researcher's understanding of the school and context of study 2. Identify classroom teachers based on perceived interest and effectiveness with students in foster care
May 5 – 13, 2009	Individual Interviews	9 Classroom Teachers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Teacher perceptions of interactions between students in foster care and peers in school 2. Exploration of teacher understanding of these peer relationships
May 26 – 27, 2009	Individual Interviews	9 classroom Teachers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review of key points raised during 1st interview and member checking re: emerging themes 2. Teacher perceptions of interactions between students in foster care and adults in school 3. Exploration of teacher understanding/interpretation of these student/adult relationships
June 15 – 29, 2009	Individual Interviews	7 classroom Teachers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review of 2nd interview and member checking re: emerging themes 2. Perceived impact of relationships at school on student learning 3. Teacher practices with regard to foster students
July 20, 2009	Group meeting	2 Participating classroom teachers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present developed themes and initial findings 2. Member checking for validity. 3. Sharing of participant's experience as participants

All nine teachers participated in the first two interviews. However, due to scheduling challenges, two of the teachers were unable to participate in the third interview. The third round of interviews coincided with professional days at the end of the school year used for completing grades and other tasks. One of the teachers was not in the building at the time of the scheduled interview. Follow-up contact was attempted but was not effective. Similarly, the other teacher who did not participate in the third round of interviews appeared to have been caught up in the busy pace of the end of the school year. No interview was scheduled, as this teacher did not respond to my attempts to set an appointment. The original study design called for eight participants and took into consideration possible attrition. My dissertation committee and I discussed both the number of interviews and the number of interviewees at length to ensure that sufficient data was collected in the event of attrition.

All of the participants were invited to a group meeting approximately one month after the completion of the individual interviews. Pizza was provided at this meeting in an effort to attract participation. Only two of the participants were able to attend the scheduled group meeting. The meeting allowed these participants to review the themes that I had identified and provide feedback on the themes and the process of participating in the study. The group meeting continued the practice of member checking. The two participants at the meeting offered additional feedback on the themes, which had been refined numerous times based on feedback given by participants at the start of each round of interviews. Two other participants were contacted via e-mail for feedback on the emerging themes. One of these participants

was given an early draft of the findings and offered feedback about their representation in writing.

Data Analysis

Each interview was tape recorded and transcribed within days of the interview. I read and reread the interview transcriptions, identifying observations made by each individual teacher, and then identifying trends across interview transcriptions. This process was completed after each round of interviews so that the participants could provide feedback on the emerging themes at the start of the next round of interviews. I coded each data segment based on themes whose accuracy had been confirmed through member checking. I organized these codes into broader categories of related themes.

After coding and categorizing each segment of interview transcription based on its content, I identified patterns and connections that occurred throughout the transcriptions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Miles and Huberman (Miles & Huberman, 1994) describe and offer many examples of the benefit of graphically representing qualitative data during analysis. I developed a table (3.2) to indicate how often each theme appeared in the interviews and by which participants.

Table 3.2 Theme Distribution Table
Participants

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	P7	P8	P9	TOTALS
Adult Caring - General	4	2	5		7	6	7	6	2	39 Comments 8 Teachers
Adult Caring - Flexibility	3	8					3		1	15 Comments 4 Teachers
Adult Caring – Listening	1		2		1	1	2	1		8 Comments 6 Teachers
Adult Caring - Respect				1	4	2	6	1		14 Comments 5 Teachers
Cognitive Space	7	1	2			2	4		3	19 Comments 6 Teachers
Differentiation (See Also Adult Flexibility)	7	2		3	2	2	7	2		25 Comments 7 Teachers
Intense Peer Relations	6	1		5	11	2	5		4	34 Comments 7 Teachers
Role of Trauma/ Transference	9	2	6	7	8		11	2	2	46 Comments 8 Teachers
Seeking Adult Support	3		1		4	6	7	6	1	28 Comments 7 Teachers
Systemic Need – Information	8	1	1			2	5	3	1	21 Comments 7 Teachers
Systemic Need – Professional Development	1						1		3	5 Comments 3 Teachers
Systemic Need – Stability	3		2	2	5	2	3	1	5	23 Comments 8 Teachers
Test Adults	4			3	6				6	19 Comments 4 Teachers

Using the strategy of member-checking (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002), I asked participants to check the accuracy of the themes during the earliest stages of coding. I confirmed that my understanding was congruent with the perspectives offered by the participants. This chart was repeatedly revised based on the feedback from the participants during member checking. It also allowed me to easily see how many times a theme arose during the interviews, and how many of the participants spoke to that theme. Using this strategy I was able to eliminate proposed themes with little supporting data, such as the systemic need for professional development (see

listing in table 3.2 above). Its appearance early in the analysis may have been influenced by my own belief in professional development. As such, the topic is discussed in the interpretation chapter, but the need for professional development did not surface as a finding of this study.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) describe metaphor analysis as central to narrative analysis. Qualitative researchers look for common language used by participants, particularly common metaphors. The researcher questions, “what is the significance or possible meaning behind the metaphors used?” Metaphor analysis gives access to values and beliefs held by participants. How does specific language and metaphor fit with the themes expressed more directly? As a modification of this practice, common language was identified in the interview transcriptions. Common “catch phrases” were then used to either reinforce or challenge the developing themes.

Triangulation is a means of ensuring that the findings authentically represent the perspectives and understandings of the participants. Triangulation combines and compares different data sources, investigators, or methods (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; Patton, 2002) to test for consistency. This study used data triangulation, comparing a variety of data sources to check and cross-reference findings. Consistency between and amongst data sources helps ensure the findings (Patton, 2002) are trustworthy. In this study, each interview participant and each separate interview was treated as a distinct data source. Triangulation among data sets serves to challenge and/or verify the analysis of each data set. Using triangulation, I was able to check for consistency in my understanding of each individual participant’s perspective by comparing the three interviews with each participant. I was also able to check my

understanding of teachers' experiences with foster youth by comparing the perspectives offered by each of the nine participants. Using triangulation, I looked for and identified coded data segments that appeared to contradict each other. I was also able to identify data segments from multiple interviews that reinforced the developing themes.

Through the development of a concept map, connections were made between the findings of this study and specific fields of knowledge familiar to the researcher as a school counselor. Linking the findings of a qualitative study to other fields of knowledge is a strategy for interpreting qualitative data (Glesne, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The process of developing the concept map and identifying connections between the findings and other fields of knowledge was an analytical strategy that informed my thinking on the interpretation of the findings. As the interpretive process progressed, the concept map became less meaningful in comparison to the narrative description of the linkages between the findings and broader fields of knowledge.

Analysis and interpretation also involves the careful reflection of the researcher. Qualitative research uses the subjectivity of the researcher (Glesne, 2006). A researcher's subjectivity informs the questions asked in a research project. Glesne (2006) differentiates between monitoring subjectivity and controlling for subjectivity. She states that in qualitative research, the researcher must monitor his/her subjectivity and maintain keen awareness of how this subjectivity informs and influences the research process. As a school counselor, I have my own experiences with students in foster care that require examination. In particular, how do my experiences color or distort my analysis of the experiences of the study participants? As each code and

theme was developed I questioned the influence my own experiences and perspectives had on the development of the theme and asked how the theme could be interpreted differently. As seen above, one theme regarding a desire for professional development was eliminated because that theme was rooted in my own perspective and was not strongly supported in the data. In instances where the theme most closely matched my own experience I asked, what other interpretations are possible? How could these data contradict the experiences of the researcher? Glesne (2006) and Patton (2002) describe negative case analysis as a means of increasing validity. Negative case analysis involves identifying data that disproves or contradicts the emerging themes. In monitoring my subjectivity and its impact on data analysis, I relied on negative case analysis to help me identify themes that were supported by my experiences rather than by the data gathered during the interviews. When a theme resonated strongly with my experience, I reviewed the transcriptions looking for data that would contradict the proposed finding.

Through personal reflection, e-mails, and meetings with my dissertation advisor, I had the opportunity to consider my subjectivity. I also relied on peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spillett, 2003) with colleagues and fellow graduate students. With peers, I was able to describe and reflect on my analysis and interpretive process and my role in that process. Primarily through dialog with my advisor and personal reflection, I was able to explore my “subjective-I” (Glesne, 2006). As Glesne notes, the subjective-I is both a strength and challenge for qualitative researchers. It fuels the entire research process and is “the basis for the story that you are able to tell” (p. 123). My interest and enthusiasm for the study was grounded in my personal

experience with several of my counselees who were in foster care. I was able to relate, through personal experience, to the experiences of the participating teachers, adding personal understanding to the interview process. As a researcher and school counselor, I brought my own experiences to the analysis and interpretation process. My own perspective informed and shaped what I heard in the interviews, and the follow-up questions I asked. I evaluated the perspectives of the teachers in analysis and interpretation, and my own experiences influenced that evaluation. In this regard, I am not only the researcher but a research instrument (Maxwell, 1996). I bring my own subjectivity to various aspects of the research process. My professional experience and interests give rise to my research questions and to a set of assumptions and beliefs I have regarding the education of students in foster care.

Peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spillett, 2003) was central to identifying and reflecting on my subjectivity. In counseling, peer supervision is used to support the counselor in identifying and managing the impact of his/her own feelings on the counselor-client relationship (Moursund, 1993). Through consultation with other counselors, a counselor is able to reflect on his/her subjectivity and its impact on counseling. This practice is central to my work as a school counselor. I frequently spend time with my colleagues to reflect on my work to ensure that I am remaining true to the counseling needs of my students. Through personal reflection, e-mails and dialog with my advisor, and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spillett, 2003) with colleagues and fellow graduate students, I increased my awareness about my own ideas and values. I reviewed my data analysis asking, “How does this challenge the assumptions I brought to this project? What are the data segments that contradict the

themes that I have found through analysis? What does my negative case analysis reveal about my “subjective I” and the trustworthiness of my findings?

Authenticity

Authenticity is used to judge the quality and credibility of a qualitative study (Patton, 2002). Authenticity is understood, in part, as a deliberate effort to ensure that all voices in the inquiry are represented in the text (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

Authenticity is “reflexive consciousness about one’s own perspective, appreciation for the perspectives of others, and fairness in depicting constructions” (Patton, 2002. p. 546). The purpose of this study is to accurately represent the experiences, perspectives, and practices of public school educators in serving students in foster care. Critical to the credibility of this study is the authenticity with which it portrays the voices of participating educators with diverse perspectives.

Glesne (2006) notes that Creswell identified eight verification procedures, not all of which need to be used in a given study. A combination of these procedures helps to ensure authenticity. Several strategies were utilized to ensure the authenticity of the findings of this study. Triangulation, clarification of researcher bias, and negative case analysis were used to ensure the findings are an authentic representation of the perspectives shared by the teachers.

As described above, triangulation among multiple data sources was used to check the validity of the findings. Triangulation was used between interview sessions to ensure that my understanding of each participant’s experience and perspective was accurate. Triangulation between participants was used to insure that the findings emphasized commonalities between the experiences and perspectives of the teachers

and to ensure that divergent points of view were included in the findings. Patton (2002) explains that heterogeneity within small samples is a strength in qualitative research. “Common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon” (Patton, 2002, p. 235). The diversity amongst the teachers in this study (subject area, gender, tenure as a classroom teacher) adds value to the common patterns that appeared in the participants’ perceptions and experiences with foster youth.

My own experiences with students in the foster care system may have led to biases. I used the strategy of clarification of researcher bias (Glesne, 2006). I have included in the report reflections on my subjectivity. While I had intended to utilize a research journal, my comfort with peer supervision in counseling led me to utilize a similar model for reflecting on my subjectivity during the research process. I utilized peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spillett, 2003) to reflect on how my experiences might color my interpretations of the data. I met and e-mailed my advisor regularly with reflections and questions about my role as a researcher. I also spoke with fellow graduate students who were in the process of conducting dissertation research. I spoke with my colleagues in the school counseling office to reflect on my relationship with the study participants and to reflect on my work with foster youth.

To further this work I utilized negative case analysis (Glesne, 2006; Patton, 2002). I carefully combed the data looking for examples that contradicted the themes I found. My reflections on my biases strengthened the negative case analysis. I was able to ask, what data contradicts the beliefs I have held in my own work with foster youth? Lastly, and most importantly, I utilized member checking extensively. This is a study

about teachers' perceptions, and only through member checking could I ensure that I was authentically reflecting their experiences and points of view. As noted above, the second and third round of interviews with each participant began with member checking in the form of clarification and verification of the emerging themes. At the conclusion of the third interviews, I invited the participants to meet once I had concluded the first round of data analysis inclusive of all of the interviews to ensure that my emerging analysis accurately reflected the content and intent expressed during the interviews. I asked one of the study participants (who was unable to join the group meeting to review the findings) to read an early draft of the findings to ensure that the reporting of the findings remained true to his experience and perspective with foster youth.

Reporting

When I considered approaches to reporting the data, I returned to my belief as a counselor and researcher that meaning is created and co-created. My objective in reporting the findings of this study is to invite the reader (to the extent possible) into the dialog that occurred within the interviews. My hope is that the portrayal of the interview data prompts readers within the field of education to reflect on their own practices and interactions with students who are served by the foster care system. It is important to me that this work serves as more than a degree requirement and learning opportunity for me. By engaging the study participants, I hope this research project impacted their practice and promotes an ongoing reflection that is not bound by, but rather initiated through, their participation in the study. I hope the reporting of this study is effective in allowing the reader access to the findings in such a way that it can

serve as a catalyst for reflection on one's own experiences. I sought to provide enough access to the raw data in the form of quotes and examples to allow readers to clearly understand the themes as the study participants presented them.

Glesne (2006) notes three strategies for organizing text in reporting findings in a qualitative study. She offers a natural history approach, a chronological approach, and a thematic approach. My approach to data analysis and personal style lead me to favor a thematic representation of the findings. All of my academic writing to date has been about exploring themes and presenting data that supports a theme or idea. As I reflected on my desire to invite the reader into a dialog, both the natural history and chronological approaches had much to offer. A naturalistic approach attempts to portray the research process of exploration and discovery. Such an approach may have engaged the reader in the analysis and interpretation process supporting the reflection I seek to promote. However, the reliance of this study on interview data rather than observation precludes the use of "thick description" (Glesne, 2006) that would support a naturalistic approach. Similarly, the chronological technique invites the participant into the research process. This approach ushers the reader through the study chronologically. Glesne (2006) notes that this approach is particularly appropriate if the study involves observing something over time. Were this study a case study, following a student in foster care through a school year, such an approach would be appropriate. However, the time frame of data collection was comparatively brief (over a period of three months). The chronology of events in this study is of relatively little importance.

The approach I use in writing and conveying my findings is thematic, working to carefully present to the reader each of the themes that are developed through data collection and analysis. Lengthy quotes from the interviews are used to give the reader access to the raw data. These quotes provide the reader with direct access to the participants' perspectives. Direct quotes were edited for length. Ellipses were used to indicate where passages were removed. It is important to note that interviewees were often speaking while formulating their thoughts due to the nature of the interview process. For many of the teachers, this was a unique opportunity to reflect specifically on students in foster care. The vocalized pauses and verbal mannerisms that frequently accompany "thinking aloud" were removed from the quotes to facilitate easy reading.

Collegial review (Wolcott, 2001) was used to refine and clarify the reporting of the findings and the connection of the findings to established theory. Reviewers included my dissertation advisor, a colleague associated with a different university, a fellow doctoral student at the University of Vermont, a school counseling colleague, and one of the participants who was also able to check the legitimacy of the findings and the fairness with which their presentation represented his experiences and perspectives.

Data Interpretation

Data interpretation was informed by my identity as a school counselor. Where analysis involved understanding and accurately describing what was reported during the interviews (the findings), interpretation involves the researcher in connecting the data to other constructs to create meaning and understanding from what was observed during the study (Glesne, 2006; Wolcott, 2001). As I worked to develop my own

understanding of what I had learned from the participants, I turned to areas comfortable and familiar to me as a school counselor. I explored areas in the literature that helped deepen my understanding of the findings of this study and report on the linkages and points of intersection I found.

In the chapter on interpretation, I report connections I discovered between the findings and established theory and developing fields of knowledge. Findings describing the characteristics of foster youth are related to key concepts drawn from attachment theory and selected literature explaining the impact of complex trauma on adolescents. Utilizing the lenses of attachment theory and complex trauma to interpret the findings supports my work as a school counselor and draws on my experience interpreting human behavior in psychological terms. Linkages between findings that described teacher attitudes and practices believed to be effective in supporting foster youth in school and the feminist ethic of care are explored. Participants frequently used the term care throughout the interviews. The literature on the feminist ethic of care is familiar to me through my graduate studies and is congruent with a student-school counselor relationship.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations including several common to qualitative research. Some studies seek to represent a larger population by using a representative sample of the population. Such studies require a large sample size to ensure that the findings can be generalized with confidence (Patton, 2002). This study used purposeful sampling to gain insight into the processes and interactions that may influence educational outcomes of foster youth. The findings describe the perspectives of nine

classroom teachers in one Vermont high school. The purposeful sampling method used ensures that this case is deviant. Studies conducted in other settings might produce different findings because of the unique population density of foster children in this study and other characteristics of this site and pool of interviewees (e.g. rural Vermont setting, limited diversity of students). While the findings of this study are intended to foster reflection and dialog in other settings, there are no answers to be found here that can be readily and directly applied to other settings.

Every effort was made to eliminate bias in both the interview process and the data analysis process. However, five of the eleven participants and I were familiar to each other. As is typical in small communities, we knew each other through mutual friendships and organizational affiliations. I am a community member whose own children are students within the same school district (though not in the same school or grade level). My wife is also employed at an elementary school within the district. Although I am not an employee of this district, I am a colleague in the relatively small pool of high school educators in northern Vermont. There are risks and benefits associated with conducting research in one's own local community. A degree of familiarity between participants and the researcher promotes the development of rapport and access. However, the same relationships that offer the researcher familiarity offer potential bias. A careful decision was made regarding potential biases. I concluded that the familiarity between the researcher and several of the participants in this study would streamline access to the interviewees and facilitate a relative ease during the interview process. Familiarity here is distinguished from any close relationship. I had no social or professional contact with any of the participants for

over two years prior to the study, thereby minimizing the potential for bias or influence during the interview and analysis process. Multiple rounds of member checking also helped to formalize the handling of the data to guard against the influence of bias.

This study is also limited by the attrition of two interviewees before the third round of interviews and the attrition of seven participants prior to the concluding round of member checking. More data would have been collected had all nine teachers had participated in all three rounds of interviews. A total of 25 interview transcripts comprise the interview data, rather than the 27 transcripts that would have been available had attrition not occurred. The final round of member checking was limited to three participants, two who met with me after data analysis and a third who read a draft of the findings.

Chapter 4

Findings

This study asked nine educators to describe their experiences with and perceptions of foster youth in public high school classrooms. The objective of this exploratory study was to better understand how classroom teachers understand the educational experiences of foster youth. The study asked classroom teachers to reflect on the relationships foster youth developed and maintained at school with peers and adults. Through the school relationships of foster youth, the study asked: What have educators observed in working with students in foster care that make this population unique? What do educators experience as the distinguishing characteristics of students in foster care? And in what ways do educators feel they are able to support foster children in school?

Grounded in the researcher's understanding of attachment theory, the interview questions focused on the relationships students in foster care formed and maintained with their peers and adults at school, and asked teachers to describe practices that they felt were most effective in their work with foster youth. The experiences, perceptions, and understandings offered by the participating teachers fell into three broad categories: student characteristics, support strategies for this population, and organizational level concerns. Multiple themes within each category are identified in the findings.

The category of student characteristics includes the participating teachers' observations of foster youth's behavioral traits, interactions with peers and teachers, and the needs that these students bring into the school setting. The support strategies

include the teacher attitudes, qualities, and behaviors that the participants felt supported the academic achievement and engagement of students in foster care. While the teachers felt that they were able to offer substantial support to students in foster care within their classrooms, important concerns remained. Teachers expressed concerns about the frequency with which foster youth changed foster homes and schools and concerns about what information was made available to teachers regarding placement changes and other sources of stress for foster youth. These concerns are described in the category of organizational level concerns.

Student Characteristics

The participating teachers recognized all students as unique individuals, with a unique set of strengths and needs in the classroom. Seven of the nine participants explicitly stated that each student, regardless of foster care status, is unique. When asked to describe students in foster care, one teacher commented, “It’s hard because they’re all so different.” After teachers expressed a strong belief in the individuality of all of their students, and an understanding of the diversity among students in foster care, they articulated common traits shared by many of their students in foster care.

Trauma

The role of trauma in the lives of students in foster care was raised by eight of the nine interviewees. In each round of interviews, nearly every participant raised concerns about the impact a history of trauma had on the students’ performance at school, though no specific questions regarding trauma were asked. One teacher remarked, “A lot of students have had some type of traumatic situation happen to them, and that’s how they ended up in foster care.” By definition, a student in foster care has

experienced trauma. Trauma is defined as physical or emotional violence marked by lasting effects (American Psychological Association, 1994). The maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, or neglect) of these students has been confirmed by state authorities and resulted in foster placement. While the participating teachers were often unaware of the details, they conveyed great sensitivity to the students' past maltreatment, and believed they saw the results of a history of trauma in terms of the students' behaviors, interactions, and relationships in school.

Participants expressed a belief that, because trauma has a lasting effect, even those students placed in stable, caring foster homes showed signs of a traumatic past. One teacher explained, "It was a stable situation [the foster student] got put in. But that, still, perhaps wasn't enough to overcome the fact that they're away from their family and what has happened. It was just not enough." Teachers understood that simply being removed from a difficult home situation did not resolve many of the deep and complex issues that result from emotional trauma. The participants also expressed concern that being removed from one's home resembled, to varying degrees, another traumatic event in the lives of these students resulting in new challenges and issues. It was interesting that the participants referred to removal from their home rather than removal from their family. Within the context of the interviews, this distinction reflected the change not only in the relationships that distinguish one family from another, but also in the routines and rituals that distinguish one household from another. This sudden and potentially dramatic change in routine and ritual was seen as a significant challenge and a major adjustment for these students. The radical change in home life that may accompany placement in a foster home is, for some, an emotional

trauma. Children in foster care have been taken, often suddenly, from a home environment that while unsafe, was familiar and was their home. The stress and uncertainty that accompanied this change in routines, rituals, and relationships impacted the students' behavior and functioning in the classroom.

One participant suggested that the transition into care could be a cultural shock. Even dysfunctional families provide children with household norms, a set of rules guiding behavior within a family. When placed in a foster home, the teacher explained, the household norms and the rules guiding behavior within a family can change radically. Regardless of the positive nature of the change, the shift is sudden and dramatic. The teacher shared her thoughts on how a sudden change in a student's home can lead to feelings of vulnerability in the classroom.

It's traumatic to be taken from your family.... to have to change your lifestyle.... to be put into a situation where people actually respect you, [where] you don't have to yell to be heard and you don't have to be disrespectful. That's a tough transition.... I think it's important to know that they've been through this life experience that other students haven't been through. They're a little bit tender and you have to give them a little bit of allowance.

The participating teachers empathized with these students because of their history of trauma. The participants expressed that students in foster care are victims of misfortune at best, and possibly victims of violent abuse. The teachers were compassionate, expressing a desire to offer gentle support to these students.

Two teachers described the perceived impact of a history of trauma in diagnostic terms, revealing a deep understanding of the impact of past experiences on foster youth. Given the intentional absence of psychological and/or diagnostic language in the interview protocols, it was telling that these two teachers used diagnostic language in describing students in foster care. Using a disability label common in schools for special education eligibility purposes, a teacher with a long history of working with at risk youth in both public and private educational settings observed,

For kids with... EBD [emotional/behavioral disability], I think it's probably the stress of the family situation that created it... their particular problem.... I'm pretty sure they weren't born that way. They became that way because of their situation.

This teacher in particular and several participants in general, differentiated between most learning disabilities and the disability EBD, which was perceived to be a function of the students' traumatic history. The difficulty students with an emotional/behavioral disorder had in school were described as a function of their situations at home and as something that developed over time. The teacher quoted above distinguished these school difficulties from other types of disability and special education eligibility (such as dyslexia or a disability related to math calculation) based on their perceived origin. He believed that these students' difficulties in school and the accompanying diagnosis developed as a result of past trauma, whereas other students in need of special education services typically struggle for reasons that would, in his mind, exist regardless of that individual's situation at home.

Another teacher spoke of the impact of past trauma in terms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder directly resulting from traumatic experience(s) in which the person has been exposed to an event where the threat of death, serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of the self or others is present. Further, the individual's response to the threat involved intense fear and helplessness (American Psychological Association, 1994). This participant believed that the maltreatment that resulted in a student's placement in foster care could also lead to PTSD and PTSD related symptoms. He explained,

A lot of students have had some type of traumatic situation happen to them. And that's how they got into foster care. So I think it's more of... how they're dealing with the PTSD... their boundary issues, their anger management. So it's not necessarily [being in] foster care that is causing [the issues].... We are seeing the [impact of] PTSD and it just so happens that they are in foster care.

Both of these teachers observed that the traumatic events in these students' lives had a direct impact on their functioning at school. Like the other seven study participants, these teachers distinguished between a traumatic history and foster care, noting that some students who are not in foster care have also experienced trauma. While describing distinguishing characteristics common to students in foster care, the participants explained that these characteristics were primarily a function of past trauma, and only to a lesser degree a function of being in foster care. They suggested that other students not in foster care who have experienced trauma share similar characteristics.

Two of the teachers described specific instances in which students in foster care projected characteristics of past relationships and trauma onto their relationship with the teacher. In the field of counseling, this form of projection is known as transference. Transference occurs when an individual projects emotions, experiences and expectations from one relationship into another relationship (Deurzen-Smith, 1988; Hughes, 2004). One teacher understood her relationship with the student as a function of the traumatic relationship the student had with her own mother.

I have one girl that... left her mother's home and I just feel like she really doesn't like females that are younger, like her mom's age.

Sometimes I feel like the brunt of her warpath, because all of her other teachers are male. She doesn't like females.

This teacher believed that her work with the student was directly impacted by the negative relationship the student had with her mother. Because she shared the general characteristics of age and gender with the student's mother, the teacher viewed her relationship with the student as distinct from that of male teachers. The student's interactions with the teacher were marked by anger that was believed, by the teacher, to be displaced. The teacher understood the anger the student expressed towards her as anger felt towards the mother. Because her own mother frequently disappointed the student, the teacher hypothesized that expectations of disappointment affected each interaction between the student and teacher. The teacher believed that the student behaved as though the conflict she experienced with her mother existed with the teacher.

Intense Peer Interactions

Interviewees were asked to report what they noticed about the relationships foster students had with their peers. For about half of the participants, the initial response was that these relationships were “typical.” However, once participants were asked to describe specific student interactions, patterns developed. Though the structure of the classroom often hid the intense peer relationships from casual observance, when prompted to describe the peer relations maintained by foster youth, teachers were consistent as they described intensity of varying types. The identified patterns reflected potency in the relationships foster youth had with their peers. In some instances, the relationships were seen as a great strength for the foster youth. More often, the relationships were described as tumultuous and made it difficult for the foster youth to develop an effective peer support network. While some of the foster youth did, according to the teachers, manage and maintain typical peer relations, many others struggled in their daily interactions with peers.

Positive intense peer interactions

Several teachers shared examples of interactions with peers that were supportive and at times protective in nature. One teacher described a foster student who looked out for other students. “She’ll take other kids under her wing.... She seems kind of protective of kids she knows are having trouble.” These supportive interactions were most often observed between two students who faced numerous challenges outside of school. While only one of the two students may have been in foster care, the two shared a common bond due to family dysfunction or stress. Throughout the interviews, many of the characteristics common to foster students were understood as a function of difficulty in the family of origin, and not a function of foster care itself. Interviewees

noted that many other students share similar family stressors (e.g. poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, extreme anger) in their homes regardless of their foster status. These shared family stressors sometimes were reported as the foundation for supportive, protective friendships.

A teacher warmly described a supportive friendship between two classmates, one of whom was in foster care. She explained that if one student didn't have all of the materials needed for class, the other shared her materials, or helped speak to the teacher about the need for materials.

They're very close.... very tight. And they seem to look out for each other. One of them isn't in foster care, but her home life is really terrible, so I think they do have that in common. And they seem to be really close friends. And you know, it's almost sisterly.... There's just a mature way of dealing with each other.

This participant described the friendship as sisterly because of the protective and caring interactions she observed. The use of familial language in describing the positive friendships maintained by some students in foster care was found in other interviews. Another interviewee spoke of a "brotherhood" amongst foster youth, noting that there were a limited number of foster placements available for adolescents. Foster youth often had the same foster parents, even if not at the same time. Similarly, the teacher explained, there are a limited number of service providers who work with adolescents in the area. Foster youth shared the handful of social workers, counselors, and other service providers who specialized in working with teenagers. The teacher's use of familial language captured what he believed was the close bond shared by foster youth.

The shared characteristics of stressful lives were emphasized in the descriptions of positive peer relations. Foster youth supported each other because, according to one teacher, “they know better than to give this person a hard time, because they’re already having a hard time in other areas.” The close bond between some foster youth and peers was reported as grounded in empathy. The foundation for these friendships was the personal understanding each had about the hardships the other faced. In this way, these friendships were described as different from those maintained by their peers, whose relationships were often based on a common interest or shared activity.

Negative intense peer interactions

In addition to the stories capturing positive peer relationships, the participating teachers often described negative peer relationships. Reports of negative peer relationships outnumbered reports of positive peer relationships approximately two to one. Interviewees explained that students in foster care frequently struggled with daily social interactions. A teacher who provided extra academic, social, and emotional support for struggling students in her small classroom explained, “I always feel like [students in foster care] are a little less mature, that they struggle with... social cues.” Quick generalizations like these were frequently offered early in the interviews before the teachers began speaking at greater length about specific students or instances. Throughout the interviews such comments emphasized relationship difficulties marked by perceived distrust, anger and moodiness, and the loneliness of persistently being the new kid as placements repeatedly changed.

Another participant described a young woman who was quite adept at making friends. Although she had many friends she would get angry and undermine these

friendships seemingly as often and as quickly as they were formed. According to her teacher, her friendships did not have the give and take of support seen in other friendships because she struggled with anger. The student's unpredictable and at times extreme anger prevented her peers from supporting her during difficult times. While she was good at making friends, she struggled to maintain these relationships. She gets into a lot of fights, or... bad arguments. If you get on her bad side, she's got a temper.... I've seen her get along real good with kids and real bad with kids... to the point of wanting to get into a fight.... I guess it's just more tumultuous. It depends on her mood. Because they tend to be more moody than other kids.... foster kids' relationships tend to be more chaotic depending on the mood.

Not only did this participant describe outbursts of anger directed at peers, he described relationships that were unpredictable and at the mercy of the foster youth's mood and stress level. Foster students' reactions to their peers, as observed by the participating teachers, often seemed unprovoked by, disproportionate to, and/or unrelated to the actions of others. Changes in living situations, uncertainty about the status of their cases (especially plans and timelines for reunification with their parents), and upcoming court dates related to their placement and status as foster children, were described as stressors that interfere with the development of healthy peer relationships.

One teacher, who worked in a small classroom to provide support to students with their academic subjects, described foster youth as having difficulty understanding their emotions and planning their responses to challenging situations. She worked with students to help them process their thoughts and emotions and plan their way through

challenges. The challenges included conflicts with teachers, completion of schoolwork, and managing behaviors to avoid disciplinary consequences. Other challenges included processing and planning around peer relations. She described the foster youth as lacking the skills needed to process social input and plan an appropriate response. In peer interactions, students in foster care sometimes misunderstood the actions, words, and/or intentions of their peers. The foster youth's reaction was often seen as misguided or disproportionate to the situation. The teacher described the conflicts students in foster care had with their peers: "The anger comes out and [foster youth struggle] to understand what the original problem is." According to the interviewee, the quick, and at times explosive, reaction of foster youth presented a major roadblock to the development of supportive peer relationships. The teacher offered the following example of what a student in foster care might have said, given a hypothetical situation involving peer conflict: "'If someone did that to me, I would hit them'.... Nothing about, 'I should think about what I'm going to do.'" The teacher lamented these students' struggle to take the time and care needed to fully understand a situation and develop an appropriate response strategy. The students' quick and unplanned reactions were seen to exacerbate the situation and create new problems with peers.

While the participants felt that some of the foster youth maintained normal peer relationships, most interviewees indicated that the relationships of foster youth tended toward the extremes. These relationships offered either strong support or were fraught with conflict and frustration. Because of shared stressors that distinguished these students from their peers, the relationships could be supportive and provide a source of relief and understanding in stressful times. More often, according to the participants,

these same stressors interfered with the development and maintenance of friendships. The stressors present in foster youth's families of origin, as well as the stressors of adapting to new homes, were described as causing peer interactions marked by unexplained anger, impatience, and often, the misinterpretation of social cues. Foster youth were characterized as moody, and their friends had to tolerate these moods or look elsewhere for companionship. Several teachers explained that the peer relations of foster youth were fraught with conflict because these youth were less skilled than their peers in reading social cues and planning responses.

Intense Student-Teacher Interactions

The teachers described their own interactions with foster youth in addition to their observations of peer interactions. Foster students' interactions with adults were reported as sharing the trait of intensity, and participants distinguished their roles and relationships with foster youth from those of other adults. Several participants explained that the student-teacher relationship is well defined in public schools, varying in relatively small degrees from teacher to teacher and school to school. In this regard, teachers believed they provided stability and predictability for foster youth. Relationships with teachers, even new teachers, were seen as being made predictable for the foster youth by the routines of school. Participants explained that, where family routines and rituals are unique in each home, public schools are more likely to share rituals and routines. The routines from classroom to classroom are fundamentally the same. The classrooms of the participating teachers resembled each other, and classrooms in other high schools, in terms of the organization and use of the physical space. The desks were either in rows or in small groups, oriented toward the front of

the room where the teacher had a defined teaching space with his/her desk or materials and a board or technology for sharing information. The teachers noted that the routines of instruction, practice, and assessment are fairly consistent, even as styles vary from teacher to teacher. As stated by one participant, “In class, there’s the teacher there every day. They’re stable.... That teacher’s always going to be there, same as they always are.” The role of the teacher is described as reliable and predictable for the students. Interviewees contrasted this to the roles of foster parent, social worker, and counselor, which were seen as new and more varied to students in foster care. It was believed that foster youth were less likely to have well developed expectations for their interactions with these adults. By contrast, according to this study participant the students in foster care had strong schema regarding teachers as a result of the shared rituals and routines of public school classrooms. As high school students, the foster youth referenced in this study had already experienced many years of school. The participating teachers were consistent in their belief that the clarity of the teachers’ role provided foster students with a sense of safety. Foster youths’ relationships with teachers were seen as predictable because of the routines of school. However, even with the relative stability of the student-teacher relationship, the interactions foster youth had with the teachers was reported as having greater intensity than that of their peers. The teachers suggested that the foster youth relied more on adult relationships in school than their peers because of the dynamics of their relationships with adults outside of school and because of the relative comfort of the student-teacher relationship.

Seeking Adult Support

All but two of the study participants stated that students in foster care actively sought out the support of adults in the building. All of the participants believed that adult support at school was important to the academic success and aspirations of students in foster care. The teachers felt that adults in the homes of most of their students provided the support needed for success. Foster youth differ in that they were seen as in greater need of, and less likely to receive, adequate adult support outside of school to nurture academic aspiration and success. Teachers recognized that they could not serve as a strong adult support to each of their students. Several participants explained that the faculty functions like a team, and only as a team can they provide caring support for all students. One participant noted, "I know there are some kids I don't connect with.... You hope they have a better connection with somebody else." This participant expressed her hope that the students who need it most are able to connect with at least one teacher in the building.

Participants observed that adolescents want opportunities to connect with adults on many levels. Teenagers look beyond their family for adult role models as they begin to construct their adult identity (Goldberg, 2000). Participants understood this as a normal developmental task of adolescence. A traditional classroom teacher drew on his 30 years of experience to observe, "I think ultimately, what most young people want is to relate [with adults].... And as long as they have that connection with an adult who they feel cares about them.... that's just what people are looking for." Foster youth were perceived as having fewer stable adults in their lives. As the teacher explained what he meant by stable adults, he noted that two meanings for the word stable were appropriate. Changes in foster homes and service providers were viewed as common

for foster youth. As a result, their adult role models frequently changed. Adult relationships were not stable in the sense that foster youth did not have a long-term relationship with the same adult. He noted that foster youth also lacked stable adult role models in the sense that the primary adults in their lives (their birth parents) were not consistent in their ability to serve as positive role models. Foster youth came from birth homes where, for a multitude of reasons, the parent(s) struggled to provide the consistent support and care associated with parenting. These adults struggled to effectively manage their own lives in a way that allowed them to support and nurture the youth. In this sense, these adults were not seen as stable role models. While perhaps these adults were stable in terms of the duration of the relationship, the relationship was not believed to be consistent and stable because of the struggles these adults faced in their own lives. Consequently, the foster youth were seen as more likely to turn to the adults at school for support.

Several participants commented that it was important for the foster youth to choose the adult with whom they connected to talk about the challenges they faced. Two teachers spoke particularly strongly of this need for choice in establishing trusting relationships with adults, noting that foster youth are told to trust their social workers, to open up to their assigned counselors, and to trust their new foster parents. At school, the youth saw at least eight different teachers each day, and could form a connection with a teacher based on their own sense of compatibility or connection with the teacher. These relationships were seen as more authentic and real for the foster youth. The participants distinguished between the trusting relationships the foster youth naturally formed with adults and those relationships that were prescribed by specific roles.

Students were described as taking advantage of opportunities and situations that lent themselves to opening up to an adult at school. One teacher spoke of her involvement in athletics. She described the long bus rides to and from events as opportunities when student-athletes and coaches connected. “You’re riding on a bus for two hours. I find some girls will seek you out. They just want to talk to you about things or let you know what’s going on.” While not exclusive to students in foster care, this pattern allowed a teacher involved in athletics and other after school activities to gain insights and offer support to students. This interviewee also described the wealth of information gained through simple conversations about who was picking a student up after practice or schedule conflicts that arose. Through these conversations she felt she was more likely to know that a student was in foster care and what was going on in the student’s life. The teacher expressed a strong commitment to co-curricular activities because she felt it was an important opportunity to identify students who would benefit from a supportive adult relationship. She suggested that co-curricular activities also provided an opportunity to reach out to these students and forge a supportive relationship.

Interviewees reported that foster youth actively seek the support of teachers with whom they have a strong connection. One participant recalled an incident where a student in foster care was kicked out of her homeroom for arguing about her attendance with the homeroom teacher. “[She] was in tears and came to me in the middle of first period one day and said her homeroom teacher just kicked her out. And so she came and said, ‘I just need to talk to somebody.’” This teacher learned that the student had just been moved from one foster home to another and was feeling very stressed. The

homeroom teacher did not have a strong relationship with the student and had not understood the situation. The student was angry and frustrated and found a trusted adult who would understand her situation and offer support.

Three of the interviewees talked about the challenges that could accompany these important relationships between teachers and foster youth. As noted above, students seek out teachers they trust during times of stress. A fairly steady demand for support can accompany these relationships. One teacher explained, “Some of them are very needy and they cling to the adults.” Providing a supportive relationship to students in foster care is an added responsibility in an already busy day. Another participant described feeling as though 20% of her job was to teach and 80% of her job, at least on some days, was to be a counselor and mentor. While this role was reported as emotionally taxing, she valued the relationships and felt she had the skills needed to support students socially and emotionally as well as academically. Like the other participants, she viewed the roles of counselor and mentor as an important part of her job. Teachers recognized the limits in their skill and expertise in supporting these students and sought additional support from the school counselors as needed. Time was reported as another serious constraint on teachers’ ability to fully engage in these sorts of supportive relationships with as many students as they would have liked.

Testing adults

Interviewees described foster youth as presenting teachers with challenging behaviors. They understood these behaviors in terms of difficulty the foster youth had in developing trusting relationships with adults. They reported that students test the sincerity and commitment of support offered by adults. One teacher described a

student who repeatedly tested the commitment of the teacher's support. "It took 6 months for him to figure out he did have a support base, [to] put us through the tests... to make sure we were still going to be here in the end." Another teacher shared a similar scenario. "When he first came to us he drove me nuts... He'd test the waters every day... With not just me, but with a lot of different teachers." The need to test adults' commitment was understood as a reflection of the trauma these students experienced and frequent transitions associated with foster care. As noted above, foster youth have had experience with adults who either failed to protect them from a threat or who were the threats. Once in foster care, these students experience what was described as a shifting landscape of adults. The participants believed foster youth needed to know that an adult was trustworthy and committed to the student before the student would be vulnerable and open in the relationship. Trusting relationships were built after a period of testing, which interviewees described as a time when the students acted out, were defiant towards the teachers, and were not invested in their schoolwork. Teachers reported that they had to be patient while a supportive relationship was slowly forged.

Teachers shared examples of testing behaviors exhibited by the foster youth that may have prevented the development of supportive relationships with other adults. One teacher described a foster placement that did not work out. "This was a family that was pretty invested, and they got tired of her being non-compliant. I don't know if she sabotaged the relationship." In the placement change described above, the teacher speculated that the student sabotaged the relationship because it was too difficult to form a trusting relationship with the foster parents. She explained that it felt safer for the student to be rejected and removed from a home (a familiar experience to the

student) than to forge a positive relationship with the foster family. In sabotaging the relationship, the student remained in control and was responsible for the termination of the relationship rather than having to trust and be vulnerable to the possibility of a future rejection by the foster family.

Participants described manipulative behaviors displayed by the foster youth. Several teachers understood these behaviors as a result of foster youths' difficulty in trusting adults. Students in foster care struggled to manage and maintain relationships with many adults including teachers, foster parents, and social workers. Two teachers suggested that foster youth sometimes try to manipulate these adults in an effort to manage the relationships. One teacher described a situation with a student who had a history of conflict with foster mothers. At the time, she was living with her third foster family.

In her current place, she was also conflicting with this mom. And she [quickly] created a made up drama with me, the foster mom, and her. She told the foster mom I said things that I didn't say. And the foster mom came back, lashed back out at me. [The student] was trying to create drama between the three of us.

After this event, it took time for the teacher to begin to trust the student again. She did not understand why the student manipulated the situation and created interpersonal drama, but viewed it as consistent with the student's history of changes in foster homes and conflicts with women.

Anger was often paired with distrust, according to the study participants. The anger exhibited by foster youth in peer interactions described above was also prevalent

in relationships with adults. One teacher explained that, given the stressful context in which many foster children live, their moods tend to shift quickly and unpredictably.

Describing the challenge of confronting a student about a school issue, he noted,

You have to really tread softly around her because I don't know what kind of mood she's going to be in from day to day.... If I try to hold her accountable, she blows up.

The shifts in mood observed by this teacher were attributed to the changing stressors in the student's life and the resulting struggle to manage these stressors. Teachers understood the foster youths' angry responses as a reliance on a familiar emotion that felt comparatively safe to these students as a result. The combination of high stress levels, and the relative familiarity and safety of an angry response was seen as a primary cause of the foster youths' struggle with anger management.

Cognitive Space

One participant used the term "cognitive space" to describe an underlying cause of the foster youths' difficulty with school tasks. The term resonated universally with the interviewees during member checking conducted at subsequent interviews. Foster youth were described as facing so many stressors in their lives that they had limited cognitive space, or mental attention, available for schooling. These students were seen as distracted by the stressors associated with being in foster care. Teachers expressed empathy and understanding for these challenges and often accepted the low priority status academics frequently received. As one teacher explained, "I'd say she's dealing with bigger issues than [learning about] the European Renaissance." The bigger issues reported by participants included adapting to a new foster home placement and worries

about a biological parent's whereabouts and wellbeing. Several teachers spoke of incarcerated parents. Foster youth whose parents were incarcerated worried about the status of their parents' cases as well as their own. Interviewees also explained that the foster youth were anxious about reunification with their parents. Foster youth were described as eager and impatient for reunification; they frequently worried about whether or not the issues that resulted in their removal from the home would be fully resolved. Teachers understood that students in foster care have a lot on their minds.

Cognitive space available for school related matters was also described as limited by foster youths' need to manage living in a new home with new roles and relationships. Participants were aware that these students needed to learn, understand, and function within the complex foster care system with many adult players including but not limited to: social workers, educational surrogates, foster parents, legal advocates, counselors, and respite families. Foster youth were portrayed as dealing with many more issues and adults than their peers. One teacher remarked:

[Foster youth] come in in the morning and you ask them what they're thinking about. And they'll tell you one thing. And you ask them again at the end of the day; they're still thinking about that subject. And it's got nothing to do with school.

The students in foster care were often seen as being preoccupied with concerns outside of school. These preoccupations frequently dominated the cognitive space of the foster youth to such a degree that they are unable to absorb and process the information shared in class.

Support Strategies

Study participants offered well-formulated responses to the constellation of needs presented by students in foster care. The teachers' responses appeared to be grounded in genuine caring for students. Demonstrations of caring included the offering of emotional support and mentoring, along with the differentiation of academic work.

Caring

Interviewees described forging relationships as central to their work with students in foster care. Teachers in this study were unanimous in their belief that they needed to be authentic and thoughtful in their role as educators. They expressed care in every level of their work with students in foster care. They felt that the teachers' investment in the students' learning and growth needed to be real and observable. As one teacher noted, "You actually read their papers and mark them up. You don't just put a check at the top of the page... You actually have to do real work." Even the seemingly mundane task of grading sent a message to the students. The care taken to carefully review student work was described as an important opportunity to express caring and to connect with students in foster care. Grading papers had value beyond the students' academic growth. The teacher explained that, particularly with students in foster care, these subtle and persistent messages were critical to the development of strong and supportive relationships.

The investment and caring of the teachers was seen as central to students' success. Each of the participants felt there was a critical connection between teaching and caring. One teacher explained, "If they have someone caring here, their investment becomes here at school... [It] make[s] them believe that it's worth being here." This participant expressed a belief that being tenacious in caring about students, even when

the student is exhibiting the testing behaviors described above, encourages students to engage more fully with their education. Given the cognitive space issues also described above, this teacher understood the difficulty foster youth have focusing on and committing to their academic work. The development of strong relationships with adults in the school supported foster youth in focusing on their academic work. This interviewee explained that when a teacher at school cared about a student in foster care, that student cared more about their success in school. Caring was described as a mechanism for mutual investment.

Teachers in this study actively sought opportunities to connect with students in foster care. For instance, one teacher had read Orphans of the Living (Toth, 1997), a book of case studies of foster youth. He shared the book with a couple of students in foster care:

[I] just say, “hey Jim, here’s one you might be interested in ‘cause you’re in this situation right now. Here’s some other case studies of kids in school and some of what they’ve done and haven’t done.... And you’re there, you’re one of them.... And one kid was like, “Holy Cow.” He took that thing home and read it cover to cover in the course of five days.... If anything, it’s just another way to show that the teacher is thinking about where you are and that I recognize you’re different from everybody else.

In sharing the book, the teacher demonstrated his understanding of the experience of being in foster care. As they read case studies that reflected aspects of their own experience, they knew he had read the same accounts. As the participant explained,

foster youth may have felt less alone in their experience because they were able to read about similar experiences, and also because they discovered that a teacher knew about other youth with similar backgrounds. His description of the foster youths' response to the book indicates that they were impressed that he had taken the time to read a book that would give him insight into their lives. The teacher demonstrated a deep commitment to learning about and understanding his students, and he was committed to expressing this understanding.

Teachers described finding other opportunities to connect with and promote the success of students in foster care in school. Many teachers explained that they took extra care when asking foster youth to work with classmates. When assigning students to work with partners, interviewees reported pairing foster youth with study partners who would be patient and supportive. Participants explained that during group work, they made sure the students in foster care would be comfortable with at least one of the group members. The teachers also talked about making sure they spoke individually with students in foster care on a more frequent basis and monitored their progress more closely than they did for other students. They spoke of the importance of acknowledging foster youth in the hallway or lunchroom by using their name and saying hello. Participants felt that focusing on details such as these was vital in supporting the success of the foster youth.

Teachers underscored the importance of sensitivity towards foster youth. Many participants emphasized the need to speak privately with these students about behavioral or academic concerns so their peers would not hear. More than half of the study participants spoke of the importance of asking questions before drawing

conclusions about missing assignments or absences. Asking questions helped the teachers avoid mistaking a missing assignment that was the result of a situation at home the night before as disinterest in school or laziness on the part of the student in foster care. One teacher commented,

I think... first... you've got to ask. You always... preface your criticism with questions of... has something been going on? Is everything okay?

If there's an academic problem, there might be something else that's causing it.

The teachers in the study were well practiced in checking their assumptions about their students. They expressed an understanding of and appreciation for the complex forces that act on students in foster care. Seeking information and then responding with understanding was a central strategy identified by the participating teachers.

Listening

Interviewees described listening more than any other single activity as a means of connecting with and supporting students in foster care. One teacher spoke at length of a relationship that was important to her and the student in foster care:

He had my first period class. So when I got here at 8AM he was always already here, waiting to get in the door. He sat here every morning and talked and talked and talked. Every study hall period he would come in here and talk and talk and talk and talk. And I spent a lot of time with him. Just listening to him. And you know, with him, he was one of these kids that felt like no one had ever listened to him, never cared about him, never did what was best for him.

Listening was the single most powerful tool she had to connect with and support this student. After several months of listening she was able to encourage him to make some friends and connect with peers. Given the safety of his relationship with this teacher, he was able to do so, and his teacher reported seeing a steady improvement in his investment in school, his grades, and his overall affect as a result.

Listening required patience on the part of the teachers. Many interviewees described interactions as most effective when the student initiated the conversations. Teachers needed to be prepared to drop the task at hand when the student was ready to talk. Participants recognized these students' vulnerability and the challenge they faced in letting down their guard. The participating teachers were patient and waited for the students to initiate the conversations. Several teachers noted that it felt disrespectful and ineffective to barrage the students with questions beyond those directly related to schoolwork. Participants offered descriptions of themselves as active listeners, not in their pursuit of conversation with students in foster care, but in their open posture of patient preparedness, which allowed the students to comfortably approach them.

Interviewees explained that they intentionally maintained an attitude of non-judgment when they listened to foster youth. They felt the students already had a number of adults in their lives who told them what they should do, how they must feel, or what they ought to be thinking. The classroom teachers offered a safe space for students to vocalize their concerns and struggles. One teacher described her relationship with foster youth, noting, "I'm there to listen a lot, to kind of hear them and not interrupt them.... Knowing that you're not judging them. You're there to listen." Interviewees consistently spoke to the importance of respecting the student's

agenda. They felt that adults, particularly adults in positions of authority such as teachers, can easily and unintentionally squelch the thought process of the foster youth by imposing their solutions, suggestions, and criticisms. Listening to foster youth, as described by the teachers, provided the students with an opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings.

Listening was seen as essential for connecting with all students, but especially students in foster care. These connections were viewed as central to the success of foster youth in school. Listening also served another vital role in supporting students in foster care. Through active listening and a demonstrated history of interest in the students, teachers were able to gain accurate information about the challenges the students faced. Teachers responded accordingly once the information was gained. Gathering information, as noted above, before reacting was seen as an important aspect of caring, and listening was reported as crucial for gathering that information. The importance of asking questions sensitively when raising a concern is also an important part of listening. A different teacher, describing the importance of listening in gathering information, raised the issue as well. If an assignment is missing, late, or not of the expected quality,

You've got to ask... [If you jump to conclusions] they'll get mad and start "well, you know why I didn't do it, 'cause I had to move to someplace, I haven't been able to get my books"... [That happens] if they move around a lot.

Listening was critical to understanding the student's situation before making judgments. This interviewee emphasized the importance of listening before coming to

a conclusion. He explained that if proper care were not taken to fully understand a situation before responding, the student would react with anger. As noted by the participant above, the teachers' investment was understood to directly impact the investment of the student. If a teacher jumped to conclusions without understanding through active listening, the investment of the student (and therefore the academic success of the student) could well be jeopardized. Questioning and listening, particularly in the context of a caring relationship, provided the teachers with the information they needed to appropriately respond to the student and maintain the student's engagement in school. It also allowed the teachers to offer needed flexibility with assignments as discussed in more detail below.

Consistent, Authentic Respect

Participants found a variety of ways to consistently and authentically express respect to students in foster care. These students were seen as being more sensitive to criticism than their peers. Before teachers commented on an academic concern, they indicated they gave careful consideration to how foster youth may interpret the comment. One teacher explained that the playful sarcasm and teasing used to motivate some students did not work well with students in foster care. "They see it as you getting down on them, and other people have really been down on them before.... It's more of a coaching role, trying to empower the student to do better." Empowering students in foster care to do better was seen as both the result of and a component to maintaining a respectful posture towards the students. A pronounced display of respect was reported as countering the heightened sensitivity of foster youth.

Several interviewees emphasized the importance of communicating faith in the foster youths' ability to find and follow through with solutions to issues at school. Much of the respect expressed to foster youth involved what one teacher described as "[putting] it in their court." The teachers coached and encouraged the foster youth to develop their own solutions to problems rather than telling the foster youth what to do.

Many participants emphasized the importance of respecting the students' privacy and allowing them to decide what they would share and with whom. As noted above, teachers asked questions specifically related to assignments and work completion when needed, but emphasis was given to student-initiated conversation. One teacher, who expressed a particularly strong commitment to forging relationships with her students explained, "I'm not going to try to push on her and try to be her best friend and try to get her to talk and open up." The advantage that participants felt they had over other adults in these students' lives was that the students had choice about the nature of their relationship with a teacher. Students could maintain a strictly academic relationship, or they could choose to connect on a more personal level with a teacher, sharing their experiences and feelings. Interviewees felt that the element of choice distinguished their role and relationship to the foster youth from that of the assigned roles and relationships of counselors, social workers, and foster parents. They felt that foster youth were often told to trust counselors and foster parents and to share information. Foster youth had many teachers at school, and could choose whether or not to share information with some, all, or none of their teachers. Many participants felt that the fact that foster youth chose what to share and with whom, at school, resulted in foster youth choosing to forge strong relationships with certain teachers.

Flexibility/Differentiation

The development of strong relationships with students in foster care, and the listening described above, positioned the teachers to better understand the needs of the students in foster care. Participants were specifically asked about ways in which they might differentiate instruction and/or classroom practices in response to the needs of foster youth. They were consistent in their responses. The foster students the interviewees spoke of required no change in instruction or curriculum and the teachers did not make any modifications for students based solely on foster status. They reported making modifications or adjustments to assignments for students in foster care as they would for any of their students, based on specific, expressed need. Many teachers spoke of accommodating poor attendance patterns. Students in foster care were reported to have more absences than their peers. This was presumed to be a result of meetings and changes at home related to the fact that they were in foster care. Teachers responded to frequent and at times prolonged absences as they would for students with a medical condition. Accommodations included extended time to complete assignments and alternatives to the assignments given to their peers. One teacher expressed the importance of being flexible while still holding the student accountable for the material.

If a student comes in and doesn't have something done, or has to leave for some reason, I still expect that they'll get the work done, or get an equivalent amount of work done under a different timeline or circumstance.

Participants felt it was important to have enough information regarding the student's circumstances to understand the need for alternatives. This allowed teachers to be what one participant called "fair, but unequal" in their treatment of students. Foster students were sometimes given assignments or due dates that were different from their classmates, and teachers felt that some justification was needed to support those modifications.

One teacher spoke at length about her practice of differentiating assignments. She offered choices to all students regarding how they demonstrated their knowledge or mastery of content. She felt that offering choice in assignments for all students allowed students in foster care, as well as students on formal plans such as Individual Education Plans or 504 Plans (required by law for students with documented disabilities that impacted their education) to do work appropriate to their need and ability without having to be singled out or identified in the classroom. As noted above, participants viewed foster youth as being particularly sensitive. This teacher felt that assignment choice for all students in the class was particularly important for students in foster care as it gives them access to accommodations without feeling they are being treated differently than their classmates. She noted that it also allowed foster youth access to the same accommodations made for students on formalized plans without needing to meet all of the eligibility requirements of other programs.

Another teacher adjusted certain assignments to accommodate students in foster care. Students in his class were asked to interview a parent about media portrayals during their childhood. He explained the need to adjust this assignment for students in foster care,

That was a real problem. [Foster] kids were either real late with that, or ... you really needed to be aware of what's going on. I had one kid in foster care that didn't do it. Another was late.... So [if I know that a student is in foster care], when I give the instructions to the whole class I tell them it just has to be an adult. I say it could be anyone; it's just got to be someone from a different generation... because I know that's going to be an issue [for the foster youth].

This teacher offered flexibility to the whole class when he knew there were students in the class that are not living with their parents. In addition to suggesting they interview any adult about popular media for the project, he described taking time with individual students to think of adults they would be comfortable interviewing.

Teachers consistently reported being flexible with students in foster care. Modifications in the content and timelines for assignments were made to accommodate poor attendance patterns and to ensure that students could complete assignments regardless of their living situation.

Organizational Level Concerns

The teachers who participated in this study repeatedly spoke of concerns at the organizational level, even though the interviews focused on observations and experiences in the classroom. Interviewees spoke of the impact larger organizations (schools and social service agencies) had on their experiences with foster youth in their classrooms. These comments were brief as the teachers remained focused on the interview questions, but the frequency with which these concerns were raised warranted their inclusion in the findings. Interviewees felt they were not given the information

they needed to appropriately support foster youth in their classrooms. Teachers wanted to be informed about significant events in the lives of foster youth outside of school so as to quickly and accurately identify the needs of these students and to appropriately balance flexibility and accountability. They also felt that the students' connection with peers and adults at school, and the continuity of their academic development, suffered because of the transient nature of being in foster care. Teachers reported that changes in foster home placement resulted in time out of school, sometimes meant transfers between schools, and contributed to the difficulty foster youth had in focusing on their academics.

Desire for Information

Participants were asked how many of their students were in foster care. Each teacher responded with the caveat that they do not always know if a student is in foster care. One teacher lamented, "I can have half my kids in foster care and never even know it." Because the interviews occurred in the last two months of the school year, teachers had approximately nine months to learn about the home life of their students. Had the study been conducted early in the school year, rather than in May and June, teachers may have been less able to say how many of their students were in foster care. Teachers noted that being notified that a student was in foster care was the exception, not the norm. One teacher relayed, "Unless you were told for some specific reason, there are a lot of kids you may have [in foster care] and you just don't know." This comment typifies the caveat offered by interviewees when asked about the number of students in foster care they taught. As noted above, the participants expressed a strong commitment to knowing and connecting with their students. This teacher implied that

her colleagues who do not make the same effort to know their students would be less aware of who is in foster care.

Teachers were clear and articulate in respecting the privacy of students. They did not want to know the details that led to state placement. They wanted to know who was in state placement and just enough information to understand any issues that might impact the students' performance in the classroom. They wanted to find a middle ground in which the students' privacy was respected with regards to the personal details of their situation, yet enough information was shared for the teachers to be appropriately responsive. One teacher offered the following suggestion:

I think they should have a meeting where they [foster youth, teachers, counselors, foster parents, and social workers] sit down.... I've been to case meetings with some of these kids.... I don't know why I have them with some and not others. It would be nice to have a meeting about

[each student in foster care] and see exactly what [is going on].

He noted that such meetings were common for students on specific plans or in particular school programs. Teachers wanted to know when transitions were occurring between foster homes, and when there were other significant changes in the students' lives outside of school so they could respond appropriately to any accompanying behavioral and/or academic changes. The team meeting and coordination suggested by the participant above would have allowed involved school personnel and social service agencies to focus on the intersection between what is happening for a student outside of school and their relative success in school.

Information about changes in a student's foster placement was perceived as central to the daily interactions between the teacher and the student. Lacking accurate information about a change in placement, one teacher described his frustration when he blamed a student for her poor attendance.

I didn't know she had been kicked out of her foster home and re-placed in another part of the county... It was an issue for her to get to school.

And nobody told me about it until I had already gotten pissed off at her.

The teacher was frustrated by his angry response to the student's attendance, but felt he was not fully responsible for becoming frustrated with her because he was not informed of her situation. This same teacher spoke of the importance of asking questions to find out if there are unseen factors involved in a student's poor academic performance or attendance before criticizing a student. He teaches 80-100 students each day and manages a lot of details. While he feels it is important to ask foster students questions before coming to conclusions, he acknowledged that he did not always remember or have the time to do so. Had he known she had just changed placements, he would have been more careful in his reaction. The teacher suggested that his relationship with this student was damaged by this interaction. He felt that if he knew her circumstances, he would have responded differently, and that a more sensitive response might have strengthened their relationship and the student's engagement in school.

Three interviewees noted that they felt that less information about individual students was presently shared with teachers compared to ten or more years ago. They suggested that the efficiency of e-mail and its associated risks with regards to confidentiality, and perhaps an increased awareness of privacy laws, resulted in

colleagues and administrators withholding information in fear of lawsuits. These teachers spoke nostalgically of past experiences when a colleague or guidance counselor pulled them into the hall to quietly and discretely pass on information about a student.

It is so much more helpful when you have either a case manager or somebody clue you in on this stuff. Just someone to pull you aside in the hallway and say, “Hey, I just wanted to let you know, -----, the police came and they had to change houses so there’s some stuff going on.” It seems like they used to do that a lot more 10 or 12 years ago than they do now...It used to be more, “I’m not necessarily supposed to tell you this because its supposed to be confidential, but you should know.”

This teacher went on to suggest that the use of e-mail rather than private conversations to communicate with teachers might be one cause for the change. He also suggested that there are new school personnel involved who may be less comfortable with the informal sharing of information.

In education, confidential information is shared if the teacher has a need and a right to know the information. None of the participants had a clear understanding of what information they had a right to know, but felt they had the need to know more information about students’ foster status than was provided. Frequently, interviewees asked for clarification about the limits of confidentiality in the course of the interview because of my role as a school counselor and as a researcher focusing on foster youth. I was unable to provide

the requested clarification. Teachers expressed strong feelings about the need to know some things, sometimes, about some students, especially those in foster care. One teacher likened aspects of being in foster care to a health issue,

There might be certain things, buttons I won't push because of this, just like I wouldn't ask a kid with a broken leg to run 100 yards... It would make a difference in how you teach sometimes and I think sometimes people get so hung up over confidentiality that they're reluctant [to share information].

Knowing a little about a student's background including changes associated with being in foster care allowed teachers to be mindful in the development and communication of expectations. This teacher wanted the opportunity to adjust his expectations and interactions with a foster student, just as a physical education teacher would adjust the expectations for a student with a broken leg. For instance, if the student was staying in a respite home for the weekend, the teacher may not expect the student to have all of his/her assignments completed on the following Monday.

As noted above, one interviewee spoke at length about adjusting expectations for foster students with an assignment involving interviewing a parent. Participants expressed a strong belief that this sort of flexibility was supported or limited by the amount of information they had about students in foster care. Each teacher in the study made a point of advocating for more information, some offering specific examples to illustrate the point. Others simply stated that an important possible outcome of this study could be clarification about the constraints of privacy and confidentiality protection for foster youth. Many hoped the study would result in increased

communication and information sharing within and between schools and social service agencies.

Placement Stability

A second organizational level concern raised by the participants was related to frequent placement changes. While the first concern focused on communication systems within the school, this concern focused on social service agencies. When describing what makes foster students unique in their peer relationships, one teacher simply stated that a student in foster care is always the new kid. This teacher felt that students in foster care are in a perpetual state of transition. His colleague, speaking of the relationship that exists between a student and a school noted,

I feel like one of the biggest problems I deal with in the foster care system is that they move so much. It's hard to build that long-term relationship, like with the school.... Over the period of years in that town, the school, everybody is able to make a good relationship with the kid. That's impossible [with students in foster care] because the move so much.

This interviewee felt that, in addition to relationships with their individual teachers, students become familiar to the broader school community that extends beyond the classroom walls. Because foster youth frequently changed schools, this teacher felt they were never fully integrated into the school community.

Teachers reported changes in foster youths' behavior and academic performance when changes occurred in the students' foster home placement. These changes in school behavior and performance were reported even if the change in foster

home was not accompanied by a change in school. They also reported trust issues that resulted from what one teacher called the “transitory nature” of the foster care system. The frequent moves between schools that sometimes accompany changes in foster homes made it challenging for foster youth to invest in their relationships at school and in their academic progress. One interviewee suggested that placement changes further increased the need for teachers to develop strong relationships with students in foster care. As noted above, investment on the part of the teacher encourages students in foster care to invest in school. Because foster youth may be less connected to the broader school community, the investment of and relationship with individual teachers is particularly important. Careful relationship building was one way the teachers supported foster youth towards academic success.

Another participant reinforced the notion that it was particularly challenging to connect with these students because of their frequent moves. She explained what she believes the students must think, “Well in five months [I might move] anyway. I’ll be back at [the other school] next year, so what do I care? Why am I even going to try?” The students’ interest in connecting with the school community and personnel was described as hampered by the belief that they would be transitioning again soon anyway. Another interviewee described the impact in terms of foster youths’ connection with the people at school. “If they’re only [here] a couple months, they’re more distant.... They’re going to be more self-contained.... They’re just [thinking], ‘I’m just here for a little bit’ and put up their protective shield.” Stable placements were seen as assets in that they promoted long-term, predictable relationships with teachers, peers, and foster families. Stable placements allowed the supporting

institutions (schools and the Department of Children and Families) to know and understand foster youth as individuals. Placements that are subject to frequent and sometimes sudden changes were reported to interfere with those relationships.

Changes in placement were also reported to impact the students' organizational abilities in very concrete ways. Regardless of the impact of placement stability on the development of relationships and investment at school, it impacted the students' ability to follow through on assignments. One teacher explained the impact when describing a student who could not find her textbook.

She was looking for a book. And she was like, "Well I don't have my book. It's at my other home." And I'm like, "Your other home?"

"Well I was taken out of my foster home, and so it's at my old foster home, and I had to leave so quickly, I didn't get any of the books, but I think I'm going back there in a week." So it's this uncertainty of... where's she going to be next week?

This sort of uncertainty contributed to the student's difficulty in focusing on school.

This uncertainty on the part of foster youth regarding where they will be staying was identified as a major factor contributing to the difficulty foster youth had engaging with their academics.. In even more practical terms, this particular student was not able to keep pace with her schoolwork because she did not have access to all of her materials. Many of the teachers shared concerns about the foster youth's ability to maintain the organization needed to succeed in school. Participants described organizational difficulties as directly linked to changes in placement.

Summary

Interviewees identified characteristics that they felt distinguished foster youth from their peers in school. They noted differences in the relationships foster youth maintained at school with both peers and adults. Teachers described the impact that a history of trauma and involvement in what was seen as a complex social service network had on the foster youths' relationships and focus at school. Teachers explained the attitudes, understandings, and actions that they relied on to support students in foster care. They noted they were uniquely positioned to develop supportive relationships with foster youth because of their clearly defined and predictable role as teachers, and because foster youth could choose whether or not they wanted to receive non-academic support from these teachers. Emphasis was given to caring, active listening, and intentionally and carefully respecting the foster youth. Participants explained the need to modify assignments and timelines to accommodate foster youth. Though focusing on experiences and observations in their classrooms, the teachers raised organizational level concerns about the impact that limited information sharing (at the school level), and frequent placement changes and transitions (a social service agency concern) had on teachers' abilities to serve the needs of foster youth and support their full engagement with school.

Chapter 5

Considering the Study Findings in Light of Established Theory:

A Practitioner/Researcher Perspective

The findings of this study reflect the experiences and perceptions of nine classroom teachers in one rural high school in Vermont. In individual interviews teachers were asked to offer their observations based on their classroom interactions with students in foster care. The findings represent a classroom perspective.

Participants described their experiences with foster youth, and their perceptions of this population, which pointed to several distinguishing characteristics of foster youth in school. These characteristics were understood as resulting from a history of trauma and included relationship difficulties with both peers and adults and challenges with focusing on school and the related tasks of schooling. Participating teachers also described what they perceived to be effective strategies for supporting students in foster care, including offering flexibility with assignments and building relationships through listening, patience and maintaining a respectful posture towards the students.

This study was built on the supposition that public education, while imperfect, is intended to guarantee that all students achieve a minimal level of education. Anyone, regardless of age, can access free public education until a high school diploma is earned (Reedy & Cernosia, 2006). Foster youth are an identifiable population that does not fully and consistently realize the outcome public education is intended to guarantee (as indicated in the literature reviewed in Chapter 1). The participating teachers in this study noted that other students might share many of the same characteristics and needs of foster youth. However, foster status offers a clear indication that a student may

exhibit certain characteristics or have particular needs, distinct from the general population. The findings of this study, when paired with relevant insights offered in the literature on attachment, trauma, and caring, allow educators to connect their individual experiences with broader concepts.

Interpretation of study findings involves asking what the findings mean, connecting findings to personal experience, and/or connecting findings to theory (Glesne, 2006). Connections between the findings of this study and key concepts in broader fields of study are explored in this chapter. What follows is my interpretation of the findings relative to key concepts from attachment theory, research on traumatic stress responses in adolescents, and the literature on caring. My goal is to connect the experiences of the study participants with broader fields of knowledge.

Researcher as Interpreter

Qualitative research tends to raise more questions than it answers (Patton, 2002). This study was designed as an exploration of the experiences one group of high school teachers have had in working with students in foster care. In interpreting the findings, I continued the theme of exploration. I explored areas of interest and relevance to me as a counselor to deepen my understanding of the findings. As noted in the introduction to this study, I am a researcher/practitioner. My interpretive work focuses on connecting the specific experiences of the participating teachers with broader understandings to further my work with students in foster care. My work with foster youth requires collaboration with teachers. Connecting the findings of this study with attachment theory, an emerging understanding of complex trauma, and the literature on caring will allow me to think broadly when conceptualizing the needs of

my students and will support my collaboration with colleagues. As a practitioner/researcher, this work will inform my collaboration with colleagues about the needs of specific students and will promote the development of professional knowledge. Professional knowledge is differentiated from other formal forms of knowledge. It is knowledge generated by professionals as they make meaning of their experiences (Eraut, 1994).

As a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont, I am working towards a professional practice degree. The coursework in the doctoral program emphasizes the role of leadership in the development of communities of practice. A community of practice is a professional community that emphasizes shared learning as a means of increasing organizational effectiveness (Niesz, 2010). This study offers findings and explores theoretical linkages that can inform dialog within educational communities of practice. It has informed, and will continue to inform, my own practice and professional dialog as a school counselor and member of a professional school community. As a researcher/practitioner, using my new knowledge to support my work as an informal leader within my community of practice has been central in making my research meaningful to me. This study has positioned me to share my newly expanded professional knowledge with the community of educators with whom I work.

The findings of this study reflect and relate to key concepts in the literature on attachment theory, traumatic stress, and to the feminist ethic of care. As a school counselor and researcher, I have a unique perspective. I am professionally aligned with classroom teachers and their perspectives. We share the common goal of educating

adolescents in a public high school. While classroom teachers focus on, and have expertise in curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment, my expertise as an educator emphasizes the social and emotional development of adolescents. My training and background are different, allowing me to connect the experiences and perceptions of the classroom teachers to certain aspects of other fields of knowledge including attachment theory and the literature on traumatic stress responses in adolescents. I sought to connect the findings to broader fields of understanding, developing my professional knowledge and understanding as a school counselor who works with students in foster care. I explored the intersections and areas of potential alignment within the psychological literature as a practitioner/researcher, giving emphasis to the development of pragmatic understanding as is needed by the practitioner, as well as to the development of knowledge within the academic tradition.

Beginning with the review of the literature on attachment theory I conducted in preparation for this study, I looked for key concepts that intersected with the findings of this study. I identified connections that offered insight regarding the relationship patterns of foster youth as described by the interviewees and captured in the findings (in the sections on intense peer interactions and intense adult interactions). Additional supportive linkages were found between attachment theory and the difficulty foster youth had focusing on their academics.

There is a vast, rapidly growing, and interdisciplinary web of research devoted to the diagnosis and treatment of trauma as well as the relationships between trauma, neurology, memory, learning, and human development. Exploring all that is available in the literature related to trauma and traumatic stress would far exceed the scope of

this study. Instead, I focused on the work of Bessel van der Kolk, a leading trauma expert who has committed himself to imparting practitioners (counselors, educators, health workers, etc.) with an understanding of traumatic stress. I turned to the literature review and summary offered in a work edited by leaders in the field (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). Focusing on the content addressing traumatic experience and adolescence I found core concepts that support the participants' observations regarding the impact that a traumatic past has on students in foster care and the overwhelmed and distracted presentation of these students that the teachers characterized as limited cognitive space. My understanding of these concepts was further developed by an article that offered guidance in the diagnosis of children and adolescents with histories of complex trauma (multiple, chronic and prolonged trauma). This article offered descriptions of the impact complex trauma has on the relationships, behaviors, and the emotional state of these children and adolescents (van der Kolk, 2005). The article focused on symptomology and in doing so, offered descriptions of observable characteristics associated with a history of trauma. I was able to identify many intersections between the symptoms of complex trauma described by van der Kolk and the characteristics of foster youth described by the teachers in this study.

The literature on trauma and attachment provided tools for conceptualizing and understanding the characteristics of foster youth as described in the findings of this study. The support strategies offered in this study can be similarly conceptualized utilizing concepts and approaches offered by the literature on the feminist ethic of care. It is interesting to note that in many respects, the trauma experienced by foster youth is a result of relationships that were hurtful or failed to protect the youth from harm.

Caring relationships, as described by both the participants and the literature on caring, serve as strong counterpoints to the relationships that resulted in a student entering foster care. Through my doctoral course work, I was introduced to the concept of a feminist ethic of care. The feminist ethic of care emphasizes the use of caring relationships to support students and others (Noddings, 2005). As a model of social justice, the feminist ethic of care emphasizes equity of outcomes, rather than the equity of inputs associated with other models of fairness (Streimatter, 1996). The participants' frequent use of the term care when describing support strategies they found effective led me to return to the literature on care. I explored the literature on care and specifically the literature that described caring relationships and caring behaviors to identify areas of intersection with the characteristics and behaviors study participants described as effective in supporting students in foster care. These intersections became a tool to organize an understanding of potentially effective teacher beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in support of the educational experiences of foster youth.

Focus of the Interpretation

Intersections between the findings of this study and key concepts from the literature on attachment theory, traumatic stress response in adolescents, and caring relationships and behaviors as described by the feminist ethic of care are highlighted in this chapter. Primary focus is given to the student characteristics (such as intense relationships, traumatic histories, and issues with cognitive space) observed by the participants and teacher characteristics (including caring, listening, respect, and flexibility) that the participants identified as effective strategies in their work with

foster youth. These areas were the focus of the study. Less attention is given to the organizational level concerns identified by the participants in this study. While these concerns are important, they lie outside the classroom. The emphasis given to these concerns by the participants warranted their inclusion in the findings. However, this study focuses on the classroom. In connecting the findings with attachment theory, trauma studies, and caring in this chapter, I seek to identify concepts that will directly help classroom educators in their work with foster youth. I leave interpretation of the organizational level concerns for those studying the educational experience of foster youth from a broader systems perspective rather than a classroom perspective.

Characteristics of Foster Youth

The teachers in this study offered many examples and descriptions capturing the observable characteristics of foster youth in school. They described what they felt was the impact of the trauma these students had experienced in terms of cognitive space limitations that affected the student's ability to focus on school and relationship struggles these students had with peers and adults. Aspects of both attachment theory and complex trauma studies offer insight into the teachers' descriptions of foster youth.

It is important to restate that while the interview protocols were informed by the researcher's understanding of attachment theory, the participants were not asked about attachment theory or the attachment style of foster youth. Only one teacher made reference to attachment, referring to Reactive Attachment Disorder as a disability label carried by some of the students with whom he worked. In the process of analyzing the data, I used codes and themes that emphasized the language used by the participants to minimize the impact my understanding of attachment theory had on the development of

themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This allowed the themes to arise organically from the interview data and to accurately reflect the understandings of the teachers. To utilize attachment theory at that stage in the study would be to impose a theoretical construct onto the meanings constructed by the participants. Similarly, I investigated characteristics associated with children and adolescents who have experienced complex trauma and traumatic stress after the completion of coding and analysis as a means of broadening the context of the findings of this study rather than imposing these constructs on the analysis of the data.

Impact of Trauma

In his writing on the diagnosis of the complex and interactive symptoms of traumatic stress and complex trauma, Bessel van der Kolk (2005) describes observable characteristics of children and adolescents who have experienced trauma. Many of these descriptors were consistent with the observations made by the teachers. He explains that the multiple, observable symptoms tended to be pervasive, impacting all areas of a youth's life. He explained that there is no singular collection of symptoms that captures the impact of trauma; instead, there are many characteristics that may or may not be true for a particular adolescent who has experienced complex trauma.

These characteristics may include depression, medical issues, and impulsive and at times self-destructive behaviors. He argues that there is a highly significant relationship between “adverse childhood experiences” (van der Kolk, 2005, p.2) and issues such as depression, suicidality, drug and alcohol abuse, and risky behaviors, including sexual promiscuity, cigarette smoking, physical inactivity and obesity. While the teachers were not diagnosing or identifying these specific issues, they did identify a

history of trauma as a major contributing factor to the challenges facing foster youth in school. The participants' belief that the traumatic or adverse experiences of students in foster care impacted their current functioning in school was consistent with van der Kolk's description of the pervasive and lasting effects of complex trauma.

It is not possible to directly link the observations made during the interviews with predictable characteristics of youth who have experienced traumatic stress. As noted by the participants, each student is an individual, and Bessel van der Kolk (2005) tells us that complex trauma will manifest itself in a diverse and complex network of responses. Not all students in foster care share the same characteristics, nor do all adolescents who have experienced trauma share the same characteristics. In both, there are common constellations of characteristics as described by the teachers and in a sampling of the literature on traumatic stress. Those common characteristics are highlighted in the following discussion.

A history of trauma is understood to negatively impact the capacity to integrate sensory, emotional, and cognitive information into a cohesive whole (van der Kolk, 2005). The history of trauma associated with being in foster care may make it challenging for foster youth to develop a cohesive understanding of their experiences, their feelings, and information to create a cohesive understanding. One teacher in particular noticed the impact of trauma in these terms. She described the difficulty many of her students in foster care exhibit in thinking through a problem and developing an appropriate response strategy. She noted that they would respond, usually with anger, but not be able to identify or explain the thought process they used to develop that response to an issue. She felt it was important to work with these

students to develop processing skills because they so often lacked the ability to integrate multiple sources of information into a whole that could effectively guide their response.

Many of the teachers described foster youth as struggling with issues of anger, specifically, and with managing their emotions in more general terms. Several participants described foster youth as moody. One teacher observed that a student often would be friendly with a peer one moment, and the next, be so angry that she wanted to get into a fight with that same peer. Van der Kolk (2005) explains, “At the core of traumatic stress is a breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states” (p. 5). He argues that a central issue for youth with a history of traumatic stress is an inability to manage their emotions. These students experience strong emotions, and cannot control or impact their own emotional state. Foster youth were distinguished from their peers by participating teachers because typical adolescents were seen to have more effective strategies for overcoming and/or managing feelings of sorrow, anger, or jealousy to name a few. Foster youth, because of traumatic stress, were seen to endure and/or act on these strong emotions, sometimes seeking a violent resolution to a perceived conflict. Participants viewed foster youth as struggling to understand and influence their emotions and resulting behaviors.

When asked about peer relations, several interviewees described foster youth as missing social cues. Teachers described foster youth as struggling to manage peer relations because they did not always respond to social cues, or responded in ways that were seen as inappropriate. Complex trauma in infancy and childhood is associated with developmental delays in many areas including cognitive and socialization skills

(van der Kolk, 2005). Van der Kolk's research raises interesting questions about the participants' observation that foster youth appeared to misunderstand or failed to respond appropriately to social cues. The literature on trauma suggests that educators and school counselors may want to consider the impact of complex trauma on the social development of their students.

Cognitive Space

In attachment theory, the form of insecure attachment known in childhood as resistant/ambivalent attachment is re-labeled insecure-preoccupied attachment in adulthood (Holmes, 2001). This change in name reflects the preoccupation these adults have with past, present, and future attachments. Insecurely attached adults can be preoccupied with relationships in their past and their shortcomings, and with the potential for support and/or disappointment offered by future relationships. The adolescents in foster care described by the teachers in this study are transitioning to adulthood. Given the strong correlation between maltreatment and insecure attachment (Howe, 1999), it is likely that some of the students in foster care are preoccupied with attachment relationships. The past attachment relationships of these students may have been significantly flawed, resulting in foster placement. Like the insecure-preoccupied adult, foster youth may frequently return to thoughts of past relationships with regrets and desires for the relationships to have been different. Foster youth also experience many new relationships with teachers, peers, foster families, and social service providers. These students encounter many relationships that have potential to be either hurtful to the foster youth or very supportive and caring. The potential and uncertainty of these relationships may preoccupy foster youth. This form of preoccupation may

contribute to the seemingly distracted state of the foster youth described by the participants.

Traumatic stress is associated with long-term susceptibility to secondary stresses (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). Secondary stresses or secondary adversities are incidents that further complicate the stress response of the child or adolescent. For the individual who has experienced traumatic stress, these incidences can induce stress responses that are intense and unmanageable. Secondary stresses include changes in care taking (e.g. a change in foster home), and the stress of managing relationships with peers and adults when these relationships are directly impacted by the traumatic experience (e.g. responding to questions about living situations). Protecting themselves from these secondary stresses is a central task for adolescents who have experienced traumatic stress. Study participants' observation that foster youth appeared to have less cognitive space available for school tasks might be further understood in terms of the vulnerability of foster youth to secondary stress. The secondary stressors noted above may be present in the school setting. Rather than focusing on the European Renaissance, as noted by one teacher, these students may be preoccupied with self-protection from secondary stressors.

One participant explained the preoccupied state of a student in terms of a strong focus on the same non-school issue all day. Children and adolescents with a history of complex trauma have heightened reactivity to stress, in terms of their mental, emotional, and physical responses (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). They also recover more slowly than their peers when this stress response is aroused. If a student in foster care experiences a secondary stress (such as a change in placement, a

bad grade in school related to time missed because of past trauma, or a negative interaction with a peer), they are more likely than most of their peers to have a heightened stress response and will be slower than their peers to recover from this stress response. Focus on secondary stress and efforts to manage the response to that stressor may result in the teacher's observation that a student will focus on a single thought all day rather than attend to school tasks. These types of secondary stressors can complicate the youths' efforts to adjust to change, initiate maladaptive coping strategies, and interfere with their ability to access social supports and to reintegrate with their peers (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). Foster youth struggle to adjust to change and manage peer relationships because of the types of secondary stresses noted above. Further, these youth may struggle to effectively access supports that could help them manage their stress responses. Foster youth need to exert a greater effort than their peers to adjust to changes. Maladaptive coping strategies and difficulty integrating with their peer group at school may further distract these students from schoolwork. The limited cognitive space of foster youth observed by interviewees may be understood in terms of these students' vulnerability and complex response to secondary stress.

Traumatic stress is also associated with a fear of the recurrence of trauma and increased anxiety about the safety-of-self and the safety of family members (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). Students who have experienced the history of trauma associated with foster status may be preoccupied with feelings of anxiety.

When discussing the concerns of students in foster care, several interviewees talked about students worrying about the well-being of family members, particularly

incarcerated parents. The teachers also spoke of the eagerness with which some foster youth anticipated reunification with their parents, talking about their plans to move back home when they age out of the foster care system, if not sooner. The teachers' observations of the limited cognitive space that foster youth seem to have available for the tasks of schooling may be linked to what van der Kolk and his colleagues described as increased anxiety associated with traumatic stress. Heightened anxiety resulting from safety concerns may contribute to a difficulty in focusing on school related tasks.

Peer Interactions

The teachers in this study described the peer interactions and relationships of foster youth as tumultuous. These relationships were marked, at times, by strong support; more often they were fueled by anger and frustration. The characteristics associated with traumatic stress offer insight into these findings. Traumatic stress may have a negative impact on peer relations (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). Researchers have associated abrupt changes in adolescent relationships with traumatic stress. They associate sudden termination of social ties with histories of complex trauma. This description aligns with the observation that one teacher offered regarding a student who was very skilled at forming friendships, but would just as quickly get angry to the point of wanting to get in a fight with a peer.

Identification with a peer group as a protection or defense against traumatic stress was also associated with complex trauma (van der Kolk, McFarlane, & Weisaeth, 1996). In addition, adolescents experiencing traumatic stress tended to involve themselves in atypical relationships. The intensity in peer relationships that led one participant to refer to a "brotherhood" amongst foster youth, and another to describe a

friendship as being ‘sisterly’, parallels this research. The familial language may have captured the protective nature of these relationships. One teacher explained, as noted above, that a student in foster care seemed to take others ‘under her wing.’” This common metaphor describes a mother bird protecting her young. The teacher captured the protective attitude this foster youth had with some of her peers. The emphasis given to the perceived family dysfunction common to this peer grouping suggests that the relationships foster youth forged with peers were within a small subset of students and thus atypical. As noted by one participant, these relationships were unique in that they were friendships based on shared hardship rather than shared interests.

Complex trauma and traumatic stress are associated with difficulty in regulating both emotion and behavior. “Numerous studies of traumatized children find problems with unmodulated aggression and impulse control, and difficulty negotiating relationships with caregivers and peers” (van der Kolk, 2005). The peer relationships described by the participating teachers were marked by bursts of aggression as seen in the description of a student wanting to get in a fight with a friend. The difficulty with impulse control reported by van der Kolk is consistent with the notion that these students will have sudden changes in their relationships. Study participants frequently described foster youth as moody. The moodiness of foster youth was observed as day-to-day changes in their relationships with peers. The interviewees’ descriptions of peer relations parallel the findings of many studies summarized by van der Kolk.

Attachment theory also offers insight into the intense peer relations of foster youth. Through the development of secure attachments, young children learn affect regulation through affect attunement (Hughes, 2004). The primary caregiver attunes

himself/herself to the affect of the child, reflects that child's affect and, in concert with the child, shifts a negative affect (i.e. frustration) into a positive one (i.e. confidence). Affect attunement supports the child as he/she learns and develops an understanding of the diverse and complex emotions he/she experiences. Foster youth may struggle with affect regulation as a result of an insecure attachment style. Several of the participants noted that foster youth exhibit frequent and at times rapid shifts in mood, which negatively impacted relationships at school. This moodiness may reflect poor affect regulation resulting from insecure attachment.

All three of the insecure attachment styles (avoidant, ambivalent/resistant, and disorganized) result in deficits in terms of relationship development. The insecure-avoidant individual is described by peers as lacking social skills and is unresponsive to the needs of his/her peers (Howe, 1999). This attachment style may contribute to the missing social cues identified by study participants. The insecure-ambivalent/resistant individual displays anger and aggression. He/she threatens to stop caring. This is the result of a maladaptive working model that emphasizes the unpredictability of others. Interviewees described incidents of anger and aggression on the part of foster youth in peer relations. Most notably, one teacher talked about a foster youth responding with anger to the point of wanting to get in a fight. The insecure-disorganized individual lacks a working model on which to base their relationship behaviors. This individual struggles to identify his/her own emotions and the emotions of others. The disorganized individual may feel one thing and display another. There may be a linkage between insecure-disorganized attachment and the apparent moodiness of foster youth as described by the teachers. The apparent shifts in mood may be related to

difficulty in identifying and regulating their own emotions. Each of these attachment styles presents major obstacles to the development of supportive peer relationships.

Interactions with Adults

Participants described foster youth as seeking adult support, as wanting attention from supportive adults at times, and as testing adults' trustworthiness. As noted above, traumatic stress studies point to difficulties in relationships with caregivers as well as with peers for individuals who have experienced traumatic stress. Children and adolescents who have experienced complex trauma struggle with emotional regulation, and as a result they rely on others to help them regulate their emotional states (van der Kolk, 2005). The participants described the foster youth as seeking support from adults in school. Seeking adult support might be associated with the need for others to help regulate the emotional responses of foster youth. Like others who have experienced complex trauma, these students "experience excessive anxiety, anger and longings to be taken care of" (van der Kolk, 2005, .p5). Students in foster care may cling to supportive adults in an effort to calm their anxiety. The participants described foster youth as seeking out adults from whom they could receive support at school.

Attachment theory offers a slightly different explanation for the clingy behavior observed by study participants. The working model of insecure-avoidant individuals emphasizes the need to manipulate affect in order to maintain a caring relationship. These individuals manipulate their own affect, as well as the affect of others, to ensure a caring response and to continue to receive a caring response (Howe, 1999).

Similarly, the insecure-ambivalent/resistant individual believes they must continue to

demonstrate their need to be cared for in order to elicit reassuring attachment behaviors. The intense desire for adult support described by the teachers in some foster youth may reflect these two attachment styles and their associated affect manipulation.

Participants described some foster youth as wanting frequent contact with supportive adults at school, which may reflect manipulative behaviors intended to ensure caring responses from the teachers. The summaries of traumatic stress studies and attachment theory offer understandings of the phenomenon of seeking adult support described by the participants. These findings from the broader literature might inform the way that educators approach their interactions with foster youth.

Teachers also described foster youths' struggle to trust them. One teacher described a six-month testing period before the student trusted that the teacher really did care and wanted to support the student. Insecure attachment is a result of either unresponsive care-giving in the case of neglect (whether due to will or ability), or a caregiver who is a threat to the individual's safety in the case of abuse (Holmes, 2001). When teachers attempted to step into a care-giving role and offer support, a youth's negative past experiences may interfere with their ability to trust the teacher. In instances of abuse and neglect the caregiver has either hurt the child, or failed to protect the child from harm. Caring had been associated with hurting (Danforth & Smith, 2005) for maltreated children. The support teachers offer may be linked to a feeling of threat through past experience, possibly resulting in heightened anxiety and distrust.

Complex trauma is associated with "uncertainty about the reliability and predictability of others" (van der Kolk, 2005). The difficulty foster youth had in trusting adults at school (as observed by the participants), and its relationship to the

students' history of traumatic or adverse experiences, is consistent with the characteristics van der Kolk and his colleagues describe in adolescents who have experienced complex trauma. Both traumatic stress studies and attachment theory suggest that trust is an expected challenge for many foster youth.

Foster youth's behaviors that test the teachers may be an effort to elicit an angry response. As noted above, insecure attachment is associated with manipulation of the individual's affect and the affect of others. In the insecure-disorganized individual, anger is viewed as a relatively a safe emotion. It is known and predictable (Holmes, 2001). Anything new is viewed by adolescents with a history of traumatic stress as a potential threat. "What is familiar tends to be experienced as safer, even if it is a predictable source of terror" (van der Kolk, 2005, p7). As a result, caring teachers may paradoxically trigger responses of anxiety (especially during the testing stages of the relationship) more than teachers who appear indifferent and unsupportive. The care offered by the teachers in this study may be, at first, a new and therefore potentially threatening experience for foster youth. These students are uncertain how to manage and respond to relationships of this sort. They may be much more comfortable with angry emotions and reactions. By testing the adults, they may be working to manipulate the relationship into familiar territory. The six-month testing period noted by one teacher may be understood as an adjustment period for the foster youth as he/she adapts to a new caring relationship. The relationship with the caring teacher differs from earlier relationships in that the caring adult is not also associated with harm or a failure to protect the youth from harm.

Caring, Attachment, and Resiliency

The adults in this study described their efforts to work with and support students in foster care. They understood the important, positive impact student-teacher relationships can have and tried to respond in ways that are consistent with my reading of the literature on the feminist ethic of care. Caring adults are important in the lives of young people in general, and especially so for those with insecure attachment styles. One study found that the relationship a student with an insecure-attachment style has with his/her teacher serves as a strong counterbalance to insecure attachment (Kerns & Richardson, 2005). Similarly, resiliency theory describes the cumulative effect of all protective factors in countering risk factors such as maltreatment (Klein, Kufeldt, & Rideout, 2006). Caring and supportive teachers are one of the protective factors identified by resiliency theory. The mentoring movement is strongly linked to resiliency theory. According to one researcher who writes about the importance of mentoring, the long-term outcomes (e.g. education completion, employment rates, employment duration, average earnings, stable housing) of foster youth are directly related to the relationships these youth have with adults (Fernandez, 2006).

Resiliency theory and attachment theory suggest that caring adults outside of the home can dramatically improve outcomes for children and youth whose circumstances (i.e. poverty and maltreatment) place them at risk. The protective factors developed at school build resilience in at risk youth. This is documented to such a degree that researchers are advocating for practices and policies that maximize opportunities to build assets at school (Brooks, 2006). When students are asked in qualitative studies to describe what is important to them in school, caring teachers are

central (Phelan, Davidson, & Cao, 1992; Whiney, Leonard, Leonard, Camelio, & Camelio, 2005). Students describe a strong desire to be recognized as individuals, to be listened to, and to be cared about. Phelan, Davidson and Cao (1992) note that caring can be “expressed by a teacher who takes the time to read and critique a paper closely and to write comments (p. 698).” This directly parallels the comment made by a teacher in this study, who noted the importance of doing the “real work” of reading and marking up student papers. This effort represented one way of recognizing and valuing the efforts of each individual student. Further support for the importance of caring teachers is found in a study exploring patterns of school persistence in at-risk youth (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). This study identified meaningful connections with teachers who believed the students could graduate and who offered support and care as one of three interactive features critical to the students’ success. This finding aligns with the observation of a participant in this study who explained passionately that when the teachers expressed an investment in the students in foster care, those students became invested in school.

An Ethic of Care

The feminist ethic of care emphasizes the individuality of each student. Other models of justice emphasize equality of input, where a “fair” teacher treats each student the same. Caring emphasizes outcome equity. Each student’s individual needs must be met if similar outcomes are to be achieved by all students (Streitmatter, 1996). It is this ethic that is observed in the current study. Teachers in this study emphasized the individuality of each student and the importance of knowing what factors were at play in the students’ lives so that tailored responses could be offered. The teachers

described the importance of asking questions and resisting quick conclusions in their work with students in foster care, striving to get the whole picture before drawing a conclusion about how best to respond.

An ethic of care emphasizes the needs of the student (Noddings, 2005). Specifically, an ethic of care focuses first on expressed needs, which are needs identified by the student. Noddings differentiates between expressed needs and inferred needs. Inferred needs are needs believed to be present, but not known to be present. Inferred needs reflect the priorities and assumptions of the caring adult. Inferred needs may be accurate, valid, and important. Other times, inferred needs may be derived from false conclusions based on too little information. Expressed needs are those needs that are identified by the student and named by the student. The teachers in this study focused on expressed needs in asking questions before drawing conclusions. In asking questions they resisted inferring needs, and instead, gave the students an opportunity to express their needs. These teachers described themselves in a manner consistent with an ethic of care in their emphasis on the expressed needs of the student, even accepting that, at times, these expressed needs interfered with the stated curricular needs of the classroom. Concerns unrelated to school were often a higher priority and more urgent for foster youth than educational tasks. Teachers described the importance of attending to the expressed needs of foster youth before expecting the students to attend to the needs of the school. For instance, the teacher who commented on the relative unimportance of the European Renaissance in the face of a student's expressed needs captured this well.

Tarlow's Eight Themes of Caring

Tarlow describes eight themes of caring: time, being there, talking, sensitivity, acting in the best interest of others, caring as feeling, caring as doing, and reciprocity (Danforth & Smith, 2005). Teachers in this study described their responses to the needs of their students in foster care. I found strong linkages between Tarlow's eight themes of caring reviewed below and the teachers' described responses.

Time

Caring means investing time in the relationship. Teachers described taking the extra time needed to connect with students. One teacher spent virtually every morning before school with a student in foster care, just listening. Time together is critical to the formation and maintenance of a caring relationship. Another teacher spoke of involvement in co-curricular activities as a means of creating the time to develop and maintain caring relationships. She described her realization of the importance of time when she spoke of the personal sharing that occurred on long bus rides to and from sporting events. The investment of time communicates care and interest in others.

Being There

Caring requires "being there" for someone. Being there means being both physically present and emotionally available for a student. Being there means being attentive and attuned to the student, actively listening. All of the teachers in this study described being there for students in some form or another, whether it was meeting before school, pulling the student aside for a private conversation when things weren't going well, or involving oneself in a student's activity. One teacher explained being there in terms of making himself available to a student after the student had a conflict with her homeroom teacher. That teacher was there in a literal sense in terms of his

physical presence. The teacher also demonstrated that he was emotionally available by hearing and taking the time to understand the student's concern. He was fully there in the moment with the student.

Talking

Conversation was the single most emphasized aspect of caring in this study. Talking allows the teacher to learn the expressed needs of the student. It is also an expression of caring and the forming of a connection. Every teacher in this study described conversations with students in foster care that were meaningful opportunities for them to connect and learn about their students. These conversations occurred on the school bus, in classrooms, in hallways, during class time, and before or after school. The teachers described these conversations as meaningful to them, as well as to the student.

Sensitivity

Sensitivity as a theme of caring is viewed as an action that is expressed rather than as a personal characteristic. Sensitivity is demonstrated in the caring relationship. Sensitivity involves taking the time to empathize and understand the mood of the student. A caring teacher is a keen observer, noticing shifts in affect and responding accordingly. Caring teachers act with sensitivity when they indicate their understanding of even subtly expressed frustration or stress. The teachers in this study expressed sensitivity to their students in many ways, including pulling students in foster care aside when giving feedback on academic work. The teacher who offered a thoughtfully selected book to his student in foster care demonstrated sensitivity. He showed sensitivity to the students' potential feelings of isolation and to the many

unique challenges that students in foster care face. This teacher had increased his own knowledge about the experience of being in foster care by reading the book himself.

This was an act of sensitivity because it increased his ability to empathize and understand his students.

Acting in the best interest of others

Central to caring is directing one's actions in the interest of another. The teachers in this study expressed a desire to be as flexible as possible with assignments for students in foster care. This flexibility placed the unique needs of these students ahead of the needs of the teacher, for whom common deadlines and assignments simplify the challenging task of assessment. Flexibility was also expressed in terms of taking time to talk when students needed the time, again placing students' needs at the fore, at the possible expense of planning, grading, and coordination tasks that might need attention.

Caring as Feeling

Emotion is involved in a caring student-teacher relationship. The teacher responds authentically and has an emotional as well as a professional investment in the students' development. Teachers in this study expressed feeling frustrated, described the students' stories as heartbreaking, and expressed real pride and satisfaction in the accomplishments of their students. The teachers spoke with compassion when they described the impact of trauma, expressing feelings of sorrow for the past experiences of foster youth. One teacher described feeling hurt and distrustful after a student in foster care had been dishonest. The student's dishonesty set the teacher and the foster mother against each other. This teacher was invested in this student on an emotional

level and felt betrayed by and distrustful of the student after this event. Participants spoke of the challenge of balancing the needs of the large number of students they work with and the emotional investment required to care for each student. The emotional component of care was evident in the interviews with the teachers.

Caring as Doing

Danforth and Smith (2005) state that students use the words caring and teaching interchangeably. Students have identified caring actions they associate with good teaching (Whitney, Leonard, Leonard, Camelio, & Camelio, 2005). Teachers in this study were active in their caring for students in foster care. They took charge by welcoming the students into their classrooms, asking questions, assigning students to partners with whom they would likely find success, and reaching out by intentionally making themselves available to these students. The teachers spoke of recognizing students in foster care by name in the hall or lunchroom as another way of actively connecting with these students. Caring as doing was underscored by the teacher who explained her commitment to co-curricular activities in terms of creating opportunities to connect with students.

Reciprocity

Caring is seen as a mutual exchange. There is reciprocity between the student and teacher in a caring relationship. Teachers in this study described this reciprocity, noting as one teacher did, that through caring relationships with teachers, the students become more fully engaged in school. Reciprocity occurred when the care expressed by a teacher translated into the foster youth's caring about school. In many cases it took long periods of time to develop a trusting, caring relationship with students in

foster care. These students struggle with issues of trust. The caring relationship grows and develops over time. As the teacher invests in the student, the student, in turn, invests in the classroom. Teachers in this study experienced the reciprocity of the caring relationship once the relationship had time to develop. As adults, they actively and patiently nurtured the caring relationship, taking a leadership role in that regard. They did so in part because of the reciprocity: the resulting student investment in school that improved learning outcomes.

Implications for Future Research

Student Characteristics

There was close alignment between the characteristics of foster youth as described by participants and adolescent characteristics associated with complex trauma and insecure attachment. None of the teachers spoke of formal training in this area. Participating teachers may have developed their understanding through experience and/or intuition. The study site was chosen because teachers at the school were likely to have had more frequent and recent experience with foster youth in their classroom. Teachers were identified for their experience and success with foster youth. This selection process ensured that participants had substantial experience with and potentially a strong intuitive understanding of foster youth.

It is a recommendation of this study that professional development opportunities be made available to classroom teachers who have, or may have, foster youth in their classrooms to support them in deepening their understanding of the experiences and needs of foster youth. Incorporating a formalized understanding of attachment theory and traumatic stress may support teachers in developing clear, grounded understandings

of their students in foster care. Such an understanding may support teachers in providing a clear and confident response to the needs of foster youth in their classrooms. A school counselor and a school administrator identified the teachers selected for this study as being particularly effective with students in foster care. The participants also demonstrated an understanding of the complex interplay between past experiences and school functioning of students in foster care. Providing structure to this understanding for these teachers through professional development would likely enhance the effective practices already used in their classrooms. Expanding professional development opportunities regarding attachment theory and complex trauma to all teachers who work with foster youth may support teachers in developing the expertise these teachers developed through extensive experience.

Given the teachers' practice-based observations and the intersections with the research literature noted above, further study is warranted. If further research confirms strong linkages between the experiences of foster youth in school and attachment theory and complex trauma studies, classroom level strategies and interventions for students in foster care that are grounded in attachment theory and traumatic stress could be developed. Research devoted to measuring the effectiveness of such interventions would promote the development of best practices that could be implemented by classroom teachers with the support of school policies and social service providers. The existing body of research regarding educational outcomes for students in foster care provides a general baseline measurement against which outcomes could be compared.

This study gathered the perspectives of classroom teachers in describing common characteristics of foster youth in school. Additional studies are needed to focus on the perspectives of other stakeholder groups such as foster parents, social workers, and perhaps most importantly, foster youth themselves. This study focuses on nine teachers in one high school. The public education system serves students from pre-school through grade twelve. Do teachers at other grade levels make similar observations? In what ways are the findings of this study, based in rural Vermont, similar or dissimilar to what might be found in other settings? Conducting similar studies across grade levels, settings, and with different stakeholders would help inform educators' understanding of the needs of foster youth in their schools.

Support Strategies

There are many interesting intersections between the teachers' descriptions of their work with students in foster care and an ethic of care as described by Danforth (2005), Noddings (2005), and Streitmatter (1996). Given these linkages, further research is warranted. Studies that explore the perceptions of students in foster care regarding the impact of caring teacher relationships would provide a balance to the teacher perspective offered in this study. Sufficient exploration through qualitative studies capturing the perceived impact of care could lead to the development of measures of caring that would allow quantitative analysis of the impact of care on educational outcomes. There is much work that could be done regarding teacher care and the education of foster youth.

If sufficient data are gathered supporting the effectiveness of caring relationships in improving educational outcomes for foster youth, classroom teacher

interventions could be designed based on an ethic of care. The effects of these interventions could then be tested in future research. This study was limited in scope to nine classroom teachers in one setting. While these nine teachers believed that their caring responses were effective in supporting foster youth in school, that view may not be commonly held amongst educators. Future studies that include teachers in other settings (i.e. grade level and location), as well as the perspectives of social workers, foster parents and students in foster care could provide greater understanding of the impact of caring relationships on the educational experiences of foster youth. Such studies could also prove beneficial in guiding the development of caring practices in schools to the support of foster youth.

Professional development opportunities and teacher training programs introducing and promoting the ethic of care are recommendations of this study. The teachers in this study appeared to have been caring by nature and because it felt like the right thing to do. Just as formalizing their understanding of the unique needs of students in foster care by offering professional development opportunities in attachment theory and complex trauma could ground these teachers' understanding of the needs of this population, formalizing their understanding of caring in the context of schooling could ground their efforts to support these students.

Conclusion

This study found that some students in foster care exhibited characteristics consistent with key concepts from the literature on attachment theory and complex trauma. It also found that the participating teachers described their responses as consistent with an ethic of care. This study focused on the perspectives of nine

classroom teachers in one high school in rural Vermont. As a qualitative study it shares with all qualitative research limits in that the findings cannot be generalized. The experiences of these teachers, while consistent with each other, may be unique and cannot be generalized to other settings. The trustworthiness of this study would be further supported by similar research involving other stakeholders (e.g. social workers, foster parents, and students in foster care).

The findings of this study suggest that, provided further research supports the findings, classroom level interventions could be developed based on an understanding of attachment theory, complex trauma, and an ethic of care. Once developed, these interventions could be evaluated in terms of their impact on the educational outcomes of foster youth. Such interventions, if found to be effective, could be adopted by classroom teachers to inform their work with students in foster care.

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Appendix A

Participant Information Sheet

Title of Research Project: Educational Outcomes of Students in Foster Care and

School Relationships: Vermont Educators' Perspective.

Principle Investigator: Preston Randall, MA

Sponsor: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of

Vermont

Advisor:

Jennifer Jewiss, Ed.D.
University of Vermont
(802) 656 – 2711
Jennifer.Jewiss@uvm.edu

You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are an educator in a school district that has a high number of students served by Vermont's foster care system. I am interested in your experience and perspective in working with these students. You are encouraged to ask questions and take the opportunity to discuss the study with anybody you think can help you make a decision about participating.

Why is this research being conducted

In addition to fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont, I want to explore the relationships students in foster care have with peers and adults to better understand how the experience of being in foster care impacts the educational experience of these students. I am hoping that this information will provide a basis for dialog between and

amongst educators, social service providers, and the colleges and universities that train these professionals.

How many people will participate in this study?

I plan to interview a building level administrator, a school counselor, and 5-8 classroom teachers at this high school. In total, approximately 7-10 people in your school will participate in the study.

What is involved in this study?

Classroom Teachers:

You will be interviewed three times over a period of 2 – 3 months. I will ask questions about your foster students' relationships with their peers and about your relationship with foster students in your classroom/school. Each interview will last approximately 60 minutes. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-taped. I will also be taking notes during the interview to help me remember some of the details you share with me for reference later in our conversation. The audio-tapes and notes will be destroyed once the project is completed.

Two classroom teachers will be asked to review a draft the findings after analysis has been complete on a voluntary basis. This is done to ensure that the final written work accurately reflects the work and perceptions of the participants and to minimize or eliminate researcher bias.

School Administrators and School Counselors:

As a school administrator or school counselor you will be interviewed only one time. The interview will last approximately 45 minutes. The purpose of your interview is to gather contextual information that will be used to inform the researcher about the

school setting in which the study is taking place. This interview will last about an hour. With your permission, the interview will be audio-taped. I will also take notes during the interview to help me remember some of the details you share with me. The audio-tapes and the notes will be destroyed once the project is completed.

What are the risks of participating in this study?

There are no known risks to participating in this study. As caring educators, it may be difficult at times to talk about our challenging experiences and some participants may feel some discomfort associated with strong feelings of empathy and/or frustration.

What are the benefits of participating in this study?

Participation in this study provides you with a structured opportunity to reflect on you work with students in foster care. I am hoping that the information gathered in this study will be useful to you and other educators as you develop your classroom/school practices.

What other options are there?

You can choose not to participate in this study.

Are there any costs?

There is no cost to you for being involved in this study.

Is there compensation?

There is no personal compensation for participating. The school will be offered a presentation of the findings at the conclusion of the study for interested faculty and staff.

Can you withdraw or be withdrawn from this study?

If you agree to participate in this study you are free to stop at any time. If any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable you do not have to answer them. You may also decline to participate all together. You will not be penalized for declining to participate or stopping your participation while the study is underway.

What about confidentiality?

Classroom Teachers: Everything I am told, or anything I see will be kept confidential and not shared with non-research staff. Jennifer Jewiss, as the UVM supervisor, or other UVM faculty on my dissertation committee may have access to my notes and to any recordings or transcriptions of the interviews. After the interviews are transcribed the audio-tapes will be destroyed. The information collected during the interviews will not be shared with your supervisors, outside agencies, or the families with which you work. No individuals will be identified by name in any reports on the findings; instead, pseudonyms for individuals, and for the school district will be used. You will not be asked for any identifiable information about students. You should use pseudonyms for any students to whom you refer. The researcher will code the information collected, with a master list of participants secured and kept separately. The results of the study may eventually be published, but all names will be replaced with pseudonyms.

School Administrators and School Counselors: Your interviews focus on program information that is less confidential in nature. However, the same guidelines given above will be followed regarding data collected in your interviews with one exception. You will be asked to identify classroom teachers who may be asked to

participate in the study. Participants will be told that you recommended them for the study when that is the case.

Given the limited size of the school and number of students in foster care, it may be possible for some members of the district to recognize some of the participants despite my efforts to mask participants' identities.

Contact Information

Dr. Jennifer Jewiss will be overseeing this project as my advisor from the University of Vermont. Please feel free to contact her if you have any further questions or concerns at (802) 656-2711 or via e-mail at Jennifer.jewiss@uvm.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or for more information on how to proceed if you feel the researcher engaged in unethical research practices, you should contact the Research Protections Office of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Vermont at (802) 656-5040.

I will leave a copy of the interview questions with each participant after the interview. Sometimes people think of additional things they want to say after the interview is over. You may contact me at the following numbers:

Preston Randall
(802) 644-8211 (evenings)
(802) 527-6572 (school days)

Appendix B

Informed Consent

I have been given and have read a summary of this research study. If I have any further questions about the research, I may contact the Preston Randall at the address and telephone number given below. My participation is voluntary and I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty or prejudice.

I agree to participate in this study and I understand that I will receive a signed copy of this form.

_____ I agree to have the interview audio-taped.

This form is valid only if the Committees on Human Research's current stamp of approval is shown below.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of Principle Investigator

Date

Preston Randall, MA
233 Curran Drive South
Jeffersonville, Vermont 05464
perandall@uvm.edu
(802) 644-8211 (evenings/weekends)

(802) 527-6572 (school days)

Appendix C

School Administrator/Counselor Interview Protocol

- I. **Introductory Questions**
 - a. How long have you been employed in this district? Have you been an administrator/counselor that entire time?
 - b. What are your current enrollment numbers?
 - c. Can you estimate for me the number of students in your school currently served by the foster care system?
 - d. How has that figure changed in your time here?
- II. **Systems**
 - a. Have any professional development opportunities been offered specifically for teachers working with students in foster care?
 - a. If so, please describe the nature of the professional development activity and your interest in having faculty participate.
 - b. At the school level, what resources and/or programs are available for students in foster care and the professionals who work with these students?
 - a. Are any of these programs specifically for foster children?
 - b. How have you seen these programs impact the school performance of foster children (i.e. academic performance, attendance, behavior)?

- c. Were you involved in the development and/or implementation of these programs?
 - a. What need was identified that prompted the development of these programs?
 - b. What were the challenges in implementing these programs (i.e. community support, faculty support, financial support)?

III. Community Level

- a. What resources are available in the community for students in foster care?
- b. In what ways are these resources effective in supporting foster students' academic development?
- c. What is the schools role, if any, in accessing these resources, or helping children in foster care and their foster families in accessing these resources?
- d. In what ways have you seen these resources impact the academic development of foster children?

Appendix D

Classroom Teacher Interview Protocols

Interview #1

I. Introductory Questions

- a. How long have you each been in education and in what capacities (grade levels, subjects, schools)?
- b. Can you estimate for me the number of students you have had over your career who have been in foster care?
- c. How many of your current students are in foster care?

II. Peer Relationships

- a. How would you characterize the interactions your students in foster care have with their peers? Can you offer examples that lead you to this characterization?
- b. Please describe a friendship you have observed between a student in foster care and another student?
 - i. What about this friendship stands out to you?
 - ii. In what ways is this friendship similar and/or different from the friendships formed and maintained by other foster children with whom you have worked?
 - iii. In what ways is this relationship typical, in your experience, of friendships for high school students? In what ways is it unique or different than the typical high school friendship?

- c. Can you describe an interaction between these two students you have observed?
- d. When we work with students we develop explanations for why things are the way they are. What type of explanations have you developed for any differences you observe in the friendships foster students develop and maintain in school?

III. Wrapping Up

- a. Before we finish, is there anything else you think I should understand about the relationships students in foster care develop and maintain at school with their peers?
- b. Thank you very much for your time. Sometimes we think of things we would like to share after an interview. I will leave you with the questions we talked about today. Please feel free to call or e-mail me with any other thoughts you have.
- c. As you know, this study is designed with another interview in about a month. The second interview will focus on the relationships students in foster care develop and maintain with adults in school. Are we able to set a date and time for the second interview today?

Interview # 2

I. Review of interview #1

- a. In our first meeting we talked about the relationships students in foster care develop and maintain with their classmates. Have you thought any more about that since our last meeting?
- b. I have identified some themes from our first interview, and similar interviews with other teachers. (*I will review the themes I have identified to date*). Is that accurate to your experience? In what ways is it different?
- c. Is there anything you would like to add?

II. Adult Relationships

- a. How would you characterize your relationships with your students who are in foster care?
- b. Can you describe a relationship you have with a student in foster care?
 - i. What stands out for you about this relationship?
 - ii. In what ways is this relationship similar and/or different from your relationships with other students in foster care?
 - iii. In what ways is this relationship typical of the relationships you form with your students? How is it different?

c. How do you understand or explain the similarities and/or differences in your relationships and interactions with students in foster care?

III. Wrapping Up

- d. Before we finish, is there anything else you think I should understand about the relationships students in foster care develop and maintain at school with either peers or adults?
- e. Thank you very much for your time. Sometimes we think of things we would like to share after an interview. I will leave you with the questions we talked about today. Please feel free to call or e-mail me with any other thoughts you have.
- f. As you know, this study is designed with another interview in about a month. The third interview will focus on the impact of foster students relationships at school on their academics. Are we able to set a date and time for the second interview today?

Interview #3 (approximately 1 month later)

I. Revisit themes:

a. At our first interviews I asked you about the relationships students in foster care have with their peers and adults. Through this interview, and similar interviews with other classroom teachers the following general themes emerged (*I will describe the general themes that have emerged from initial data analysis and provide a written list of themes and brief descriptions*)

- i. In what ways do you feel these themes accurately reflect your experience with students in foster care?
- ii. Which themes best capture your experience with this population?
- iii. Which, if any, do not fit with your experience with this population?

II. Educating Foster Children

- a. How do these relationships impact the functioning of foster children in school? Can you give examples of the impact you have observed?
- b. How are your interactions with these students informed by your understanding of their relationships with peers and adults at school?
 - i. Do you manage your daily interactions with these students differently than with other students? For instance, do you offer a different type of greeting in the morning? Can you give examples of any differences?

- ii. Do you offer different explanations or instruction to these students? Can you give examples?
- iii. Do you express academic or behavioral concerns to these students in differently? In what ways? Can you give examples?

III. Wrapping Up

- c. Before we finish, is there anything else you think I should understand about the relationships students in foster care develop and maintain at school with either peers or adults?
- d. Is there anything else you would like to share with me about your work with foster students?
- e. Thank you very much for your time. Sometimes we think of things we would like to share after an interview. I will leave you with the questions we talked about today and my contact information. Please feel free to call or e-mail me with any other thoughts you have.

Appendix E

Study Timeline

- April 13, 2009: Conduct Administrator and Counselor interviews to develop an understanding of the school context.
- May 5 – May 13, 2009: Classroom Teacher Interviews, Round 1
- May 13 – 22, 2009: Interview transcription and initial coding/analysis
- May 26 – 27, 2009: Second round of Classroom Teacher Interviews and member checking re: 1st round of interviews.
- May 28 – June 5, 2009: Interview transcription, coding and analysis of data.
- June 15 – 29, 2009: Third round of Classroom Teacher Interviews
- June 29 – July 15, 2009: Theme identification, outline findings
- July 20, 2009: Group Participant meeting to present initial findings and get feedback (member checking). Debrief of process for participants.
- August – September 2009: Write initial draft of findings (Chapter 4).
- September 2009 – November 2009: Explore linkages between findings and attachment theory, trauma studies, feminist ethic of care. Write initial draft of Findings in Light of Established Theory (Chapter 5).
- September 2009 – April 2010: Revisions, peer debriefing
- April 2010: Final revisions on dissertation
- May 4, 2010: Dissertation defense