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Elementary School Supports and Services to Increase the Academic Achievement of Students in
Foster Care: A Qualitative Interview Study

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
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in

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by

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SIGNATURE PAGE

The dissertation of Omar Zavalza is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for
publication on microfilm and electronically.

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DEDICATION

To my spouse, Marco. You have always believed in me and provided me with unlimited space, time and encouragement to reach this accomplishment. There is no spouse more giving or supportive than you!

A mis padres, Longino y Estela. Gracias infinitas por ser los mejores ejemplos de perseverancia y siempre motivarme a ser una mejor persona y lograr todas mis metas.

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VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Elementary School Supports and Services to Increase the Academic Achievement of Students in
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There is a significant achievement gap for students in foster care, evidenced by low academic performance, high rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals, and an overrepresentation in special education programs. Research indicates that the difficulties students in foster care face span domains of social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning. Consequently, it is important for schools to recognize and respond to the unique needs of

students in foster care to provide the necessary resources for academic success. The intention of this study was to examine and better understand what programs and support services elementary school principals believe are most effective in assisting elementary schools students in foster care achieve academically.

The research was conducted within a southern California elementary school district and the research sample included eight interviewees. Participants responded to questions about perceptions of the current programs and support services provided to foster care students in their district and their insight on additional programs and supports needed to foster a positive learning environment and ensure their continued success. The participants revealed three major themes that they have experienced through their work with students in foster care. These themes included Social and Emotional Supports, Consistent Communication and Collaboration, and Continuous Professional Development. Future research in this area might provoke policymakers, district, and school leaders to assist in enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of students in foster care by recognizing their differing needs and guiding teachers to ensure all students move forward in equitable ways.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

In the United States, there are approximately 400,000 children and youth in foster care and nearly 270,000 of those children are of school-age (US Department of Education, 2016). In California, about 43,140 students between ages 5-17 have spent time placed in a temporary, out-of-home foster care placement supervised by the child welfare system (Barat & Berliner, 2013). Foster youth are more likely to experience a host of barriers that lead to troubling outcomes such as low academic achievement, high rates of absenteeism, disciplinary referrals, grade retention, and low school graduation rates (US Department of Education, 2016). Students placed in foster care experience emotional, physical, and psychological harm and must deal with the emotional impact of being separated from their families (Barat & Berliner, 2013). At the elementary level, twice as many foster youth repeat a grade, change schools during the year, or enroll in special education programs compared with non-foster youth (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Even though increasing academic achievement for racial/ethnic minority students, English learners, low socio-economic status students, and students with disabilities has been a priority for educators for many years, it was not until recently that foster students were acknowledged as another student group who persistently underperformed due to their unique situation and needs (Barat & Berliner, 2013).

For many students in foster care their academic success remains elusive and they are at constant risk for school failure. In most foster care cases because of the urgency to provide for a child's critical needs, such as protection and safety, educational progress does not receive adequate attention (Burley & Halpern, 2001). However, on July 1, 2013 the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) replaced California's finance system for K-12 schools. A major

change for school districts is that they receive additional funding for low-income students, English learners, and foster youth (Koppich, Humphrey & Marsh, 2015). Starting in the 2014-15 school year, school districts were required to produce Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs), demonstrating how increased resources are linked to meeting the needs of all students, including students in foster care as a newly identified at-promise student group. In tandem, the funding formula and accountability plans increased local decision-making authority while also enhancing transparency and accountability (Barat & Berliner, 2013). As a result, this meant that for the first time, California's schools, districts, and county offices of education were going to be held accountable for the academic outcomes of students in foster care and now needed to make sure to improve the opportunities for success in school by providing them with targeted academic supports. This was a call for educators at all levels to do more for foster students and assure their academic achievement by creating a baseline and tracking their academic progress (Barat & Berliner, 2013).

The specific way in which administrators in each school, district and agency decide to support foster care students is subjective and in the developing phases. Relatively few studies have been conducted investigating the academic status of children and youth in out-of-home care, and even with the assistance of a research librarian, there does not appear to be any systematic lines of investigation. The literature reveals a developing process in which students in foster care are offered improved opportunities for success in schools through targeted academic and social-emotional supports. Underexplored in the literature are school level services for students in foster care. Consequently, limited data is available to provide information regarding specific programs and services that can assist in enhancing successful outcomes within the educational setting (Zetlin et. al., 2005). Students in foster care tend to face many challenges that

their peers who are not in foster care typically do not, and likely require a range of additional supports in schools to help them move towards success (Palmeri & La Salle, 2017). Research has shown that children in foster care function academically one to two years behind peers who live with their birth families (Zetlin et al., 2004). Therefore, schools should be prepared to serve students in foster care by recognizing their differing needs and be prepared to provide comprehensive and consistent supports for addressing their unique needs within a multitiered framework that includes explaining academic and behavioral expectations, promotes attendance, and provides social and emotional support. This highlights the importance for schools to create an inclusive school climate that provides a pathway for achievement and mitigates the negative outcomes of students in foster care.

Purpose of the Study

The ultimate goal of schools is to provide high-quality education to all students and make them responsible and successful members of society. Taking into consideration the current state of knowledge in this area, the purpose of this study is to gain insight and better understanding on the perceptions of elementary school principals from one large elementary school district in Southern California of what programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success. This study will be situated in a self-identifying elementary school district that has implemented the intervention of district social workers who focus solely on supporting children in foster care in the school setting. After the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) replaced California's finance system for K-12 schools and included students in foster care as a newly identified at-promise student group in 2013, the selected school district decided to utilized additional funding to support students in foster care by hiring four district social workers dedicated to enhancing their educational

outcomes and academic achievement. The district social workers provide intensive case management, expedite and assist with prompt school enrollment and transfer of student records, conduct comprehensive academic assessments, work with each student's Child Welfare Protective Services Worker to ensure school stability, participate in community agency case-conference and educational meetings, and provide direct services to students as needed. The district's social work program is one of the first programs established at a school district in the state of California that only serves foster youth, therefore investigating the perceptions of school principals regarding the current services being implemented for foster care students in their school sites will facilitate understanding of the types of supports and programs that could be replicated, created, and established at other schools throughout the state.

Findings from this research effort may open avenues for determining and placing additional supports and programs into school sites needed to aid in the educational success of students in foster care. Research results of this study may be of interest to individuals and groups that support foster care programs and services within the community.

Research Question

The elementary school district where this study took place instituted a program that relies on social workers hired by the district to monitor children in the foster care system and work with school site personnel and families to devise individual support plans based on student needs. Therefore, through my research study I plan to gain insight and better understanding of what supports and services elementary school principals consider most effective in assisting students in foster care reach academic success, The research questions are:

1. What current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

2. What additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

Preview of the Literature Review

It is important to understand the circumstances of youth in foster care. Prior literature suggests that academic achievement is a strong area of concern for the foster care student, as many social, emotional, and traumatic variables impact their success. Students in foster care who have experienced some type of maltreatment or who have troubled backgrounds with multiple emotional and developmental problems tend to develop psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in response to their trauma or accumulation of traumatic stress in their lives (Cook et al., 2015). Additionally, children who enter the foster care system must cope with being taken away from their home, separation from a parent, parents, or siblings, placement into a different family or substitute care setting, and separation from their community. Therefore, students in foster care must constantly adjust to abrupt life changes, which can contribute to or exacerbate behavior and emotional problems that can lead to a disruption of their developmental process and hinder their ability to learn. The theoretical frameworks of ecological and developmental theories will be used to inform this study.

Ecological Theory can be useful in conceptualizing the educational achievement problems experienced by youth in foster care. Ecological theory has important implications for understanding lifespan development as it reflects the mutual adaptation and continuous transaction between individuals and their environment (Santrock, 2014). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), "The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing

properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings which are embedded" (p. 21).

Developmental theories are essential to creating programs and strategies that support youth in foster care. According to developmental theorists, development is not all nature or all nurture, not all stability or all change, and not all continuity or all discontinuity. Development is described as periods or stages in individual experiences related to their age throughout their lifespan (Santrock, 2014). When understanding the development and learning of children in foster care, there are three relevant theories: Maslow's needs hierarchy theory, Erikson's psychosocial theory, and Vygotsky's sociocultural cognitive theory.

Maslow's needs hierarchy theory is among the first theories to encompass both biological and psychological needs of humans (Steenbakkers et al., 2017). Through Maslow's theory, levels of needs are portrayed in the shape of a pyramid with most fundamental levels of needs at the bottom and the need for self-actualization at the top. The most fundamental and basic four layers of the pyramid contain what are called "deficiency needs": self-esteem, friendship, love, security, and physical needs (Eseadi et al., 2016). In case deficiency needs are not meet, apart from physiological needs (i.e., the need for food and water) which are the most fundamental needs of all humans, this will lead to frustration, anxiety, and a lack of desire for self-actualization. In the case of foster care youth, as a result of their adverse experiences prior to care, their out-of-home placements, and living in foster care they are at a higher risk to develop medical, behavioral, and emotional difficulties (Steenbakkers et al., 2017). It is important to understand the unique and individual needs of children in foster care in order to provide them with a nurturing environment that facilitates the formation of new relationships with their caregivers, increases their sense of belonging, and ensures a positive developmental turn.

Erikson's psychosocial theory describes how social interaction and relationships play a role in the development and growth of human beings across their lifespan (Eseadi et. al., 2016). According to Erikson's theory, individuals pass through eight stages of psychosocial development throughout their life. In each stage, a unique developmental task confronts the individual with a crisis that must be resolved (Santrock, 2014). For Erikson, these crises are of psychosocial nature involving psychological needs of the individual conflicting with the needs of society. If individuals successfully deal with the crises, they will emerge with psychological strengths that will serve them for the rest of their lives, however if they fail to deal effectively with the crises, they may not develop the essential skills needed for a strong sense of self. It is important to understand that the outcome of one stage is not permanent, but that it can be altered or resolved by later experiences (Sokol, 2009).

The first four stages are specifically within the scope of this study as they relate to children themselves. The first stage Trust vs. Mistrust occurs between birth and one year of age and is the most fundamental stage in life. Since infants are fully dependent for all their needs, the development of their trust is based on the dependability and quality of their caregivers. In the case of children in foster care, if they experienced neglect and/or their parents were inconsistent and emotionally unavailable, the development of fear and a belief that the world is inconsistent and unpredictable can be exacerbated (Eseadi et. al., 2016). The second stage Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt takes place during early childhood and is focused on children asserting their sense of independence or autonomy. When it comes to children in foster care, if they experienced harsh punishment and were restraint too much from exploring the world around them, they are likely to develop a sense of inadequacy, shame, and doubt (Santrock, 2014). The third stage, Initiative vs. Guilt, occurs during the preschool years and children are expected to

assert their power and control over the world through directing play and other social interactions (Eseadi et. al., 2016). Children can develop a sense of guilt, self-doubt, and lack of initiative if they are seen as irresponsible and made to feel too anxious (Santrock, 2014). Finally, the fourth stage Industry vs. Inferiority occurs approximately during the elementary school years and through their social interactions, children begin to develop a sense of pride in their accomplishments and abilities (Eseadi et. al., 2016). If children receive little to no encouragement, they may develop a sense of inferiority by feeling incompetent and unproductive (Santrock, 2014). The fifth stage (Identity vs. Confusion) relates to adolescence, the sixth stage (Intimacy vs. Isolation) and the seventh stage (Generativity vs. Stagnation) relate to adulthood, and the eight stage (Integrity vs. Despair) relates to old age and focuses on reflecting on the past (Santrock, 2014).

Vygotsky's sociocultural cognitive theory emphasizes how culture and social interaction guide the cognitive development of individuals (Santrock, 2014). According to Vygotsky, children's social interaction with more skilled adults and peers is indispensable to their cognitive development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Through interactions, children learn to use tools that will help them adapt and be successful in their culture and society (Santrock, 2014). When it comes to foster youth, it is important to take into account their past experiences to better understand their needs and gaps in development. Most children in foster care lack supportive relationships with adults that can provide a sense of safety, positive regard, and commitment. Therefore, they can have difficulties understanding social expectations and norms which leads to unsuccessful adaptation and lack of appropriate social relationships.

Overview of Methods

Designed as a qualitative interview study, this research aims to examine how children in foster care can best be supported in their educational settings to ensure success. Qualitative methods are chosen when the goal of the research questions is to examine, understand and describe a phenomenon (Stake, 1995). This qualitative research should bring about action and change of practice, which is inherent to this study (Creswell, 2013). For this study, I will use individual interviews as the primary form of data collection. An in-depth discussion of the methods used for this study is provided in chapter three.

Significance of Study

The literature on children in foster care, specifically, as it pertains to their schooling experiences, even though it is growing, still remains limited. Much of the past research on children in foster care links school failure to child maltreatment, however there is literature that overwhelmingly supports the notion that frequent change of placement is a significant risk to a youth's psychological development (Sullivan et al., 2010). As Smithgall et al. (2005) suggest, residential mobility with an accompanying change in schools is a key mediator in impeding educational progress. Also, changing placements and/or schools tends to be associated with an increase in attendance and behavioral problems (Coger & Rebeck, 2001).

A primary experience that remains constant for every child before, during, and after foster care placement is their educational experience. Foster children, like all other children, spend a significant amount of their day at school in their classrooms, which often is the only setting that provides them with predictable structure and consistency. Therefore, when youth change schools often, they are at a higher risk of falling behind in school due to disruptions to their academic process, incomplete information and/or delays in transferring educational and

behavioral records, and continued exacerbation of emotional stressors due to uncertainty (Zetlin et al., 2004). Also, frequent disruption of educational continuity can make foster children hesitant to commit to the educational and treatment services available to them (Sullivan et al., 2010). This reflects the importance of child welfare reform to continue to focus on permanency planning and more specifically on placement stability, not only in-home placements but also in schools, and decreasing the amount of time children spend in care.

In their school environments, children can find potential social support in relationships with school-based peers and teachers, and thus gain protective buffers to the risks encountered at home or elsewhere. At school, a teacher, counselor or social worker can meet the need a child has for a caring adult who can provide mentorship and guidance (Reynolds & Suh-Ruu, 2004). When school changes occur, interferences arise with the development of long-term relationships with teachers and peers who have served as sources of social support. Schools can be the most stable and positive component of a foster youth's life and when mobility occurs, children must adapt to a different curriculum and classroom expectations. Sullivan et al. (2010) emphasize that further research can provide needed insights into not only the effect on academic outcomes, but also on such issues as separation and loss associated with school mobility and disruption of an educational program which could include special education services and counseling necessary to ensure academic success. This reflects the importance of making sure that students in foster care are not seen as transients by school personnel who may opt to not invest time and resources to assess their needs and provide them with specialized services that could ensure academic success and positive adjustment. Additionally, it is important to make sure school principals are equipped with the foundational information and insight on factors that impact academic achievement for students in foster care and strategically plan for and assist students reach academic success by

implementing educational supports to impact teaching and learning.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The focus of this literature review will be to identify the risks associated with being a child who is in foster care. Historically, these youth have received insufficient attention and interventions, especially within the educational system, thus little is known about their academic functioning. The development and implementation of interventions and programs that focus on helping foster care students succeed is still limited. Even after California took the national lead in 2013 by enacting legislation to address the achievement gap faced many students in foster care, only a small percentage of districts have specified goals and targeted resources exclusive for foster care students and experts assert that this is a direct result of school districts' limited knowledge about youth in foster care and best practices to meet their needs (Foulk & Esposito, 2016). For instance, to accomplish the goal of actively overseeing the education of foster care students and to intercede when problems are detected, policy makers have suggested that special liaisons from the school or child welfare agencies, such as school social workers, serve as educational advocates for all at-promise students since they are in a unique position in that they understand the language of child welfare caseworkers and have knowledge of the language used within the educational system (Zetlin et. al., 2004; Stanley, 2012).

This section begins with a brief overview of the context of foster care and education, followed by a discussion focused on identifying the risks associated with being a child who is in foster care (e.g. social development, emotional development, and cognitive development) and school protective factors that promote educational attainment and school connectedness (e.g. the role of social workers in the school setting and the importance of social-emotional support). Figure 1 illustrates the previously mentioned components, as they relate directly to ensure foster

care students achieve academic growth and success in schools by providing consistent support, nurture, and advocacy.
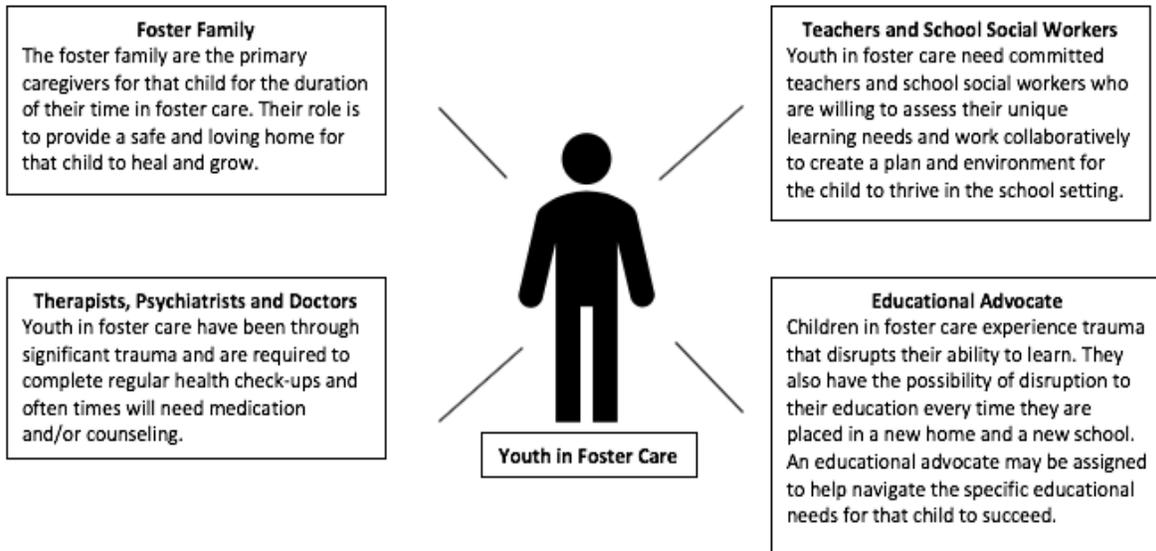
Figure 1. Supporting Foster Youth's Progress Toward Educational Success. Full Text: "Foster Family: The foster family are the primary caregivers for that child for the duration of their time in foster care. Their role is to provide a safe and loving home for that child to heal and grow." "Therapists, Psychiatrists and Doctors: Youth in foster care have been through significant trauma and are required to complete regular health check-ups and often times will need medication and/or counseling." "Teachers and School Social Workers: Youth in foster care need committed teachers and school social workers who are willing to assess their unique learning needs and work collaboratively to create a plan and environment for the child to thrive in the school setting." "Educational Advocate: Children in foster care experience trauma that disrupts their ability to learn. They also have the possibility of disruption to their education every time they are placed in a new home and a new school. An educational advocate may be assigned to help navigate the specific educational needs for that child to succeed."

While this study is focused on the supports provided by teachers and school social workers as educational advocates, contextual information regarding overall social and emotional health concerns of children in foster care is discussed as it is important to understand the need for the targeted supports in educational settings.

Context of Children in Foster Care and Education

Foster care students are an at-promise population similar to students with special needs, English learners, and low-income students. However, for many years the foster care population was not identified as an at-promise group in California and there was little focus on the causes of their limited success (Zetlin, 2012). For instance, in 2008 through the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, the federal government required that child welfare services and educational systems in every state collaborate to improve the educational outcomes for foster care students by placing emphasis on developing policies and processes related to the education of students in foster care, however it did not address the need to provide additional supports and services to help them adjust academically and be successful in the learning environment. This Act of Congress required the development of plans to make certain that foster care students were provided with the stability of an education and if this action was not taken, then states were not to continue receiving the annual federal funds earmarked for their child welfare agencies (Noonan, 2012). The Fostering Connections Act focused on three assurances: placement to be in close proximity to the child's current school district, the child welfare agency to coordinate with the school district to ensure that the student remained in his or her home school, and if the child's home school was not an option that the child be enrolled without delay in the local school district (Noonan, 2012). There is no doubt that there have been many proponents that have advocated for improved linkages between the educational system and social services, as well as researchers that have identified a number of problems that students in foster care commonly experience within both systems such as; instability, persistent low expectations, poor adult advocacy on their behalf, special education needs, and cultural sensitivities (Lips, 2007).

One major problem prior to the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) replacing the finance system for K-12 schools in California was that schools and school districts had difficulty identifying students that were part of the foster care system, as well as limited funding to establish and maintain support and intervention programs to assist in enhancing their academic experiences and ensuring their academic success. Additionally, most school district leaders, teachers and staff lacked the fundamental information and insight on factors that impact the academic achievement for foster care students needed to strategically plan for and assist them in reaching their full academic potential (Palladino, et al., 2011). Prior to school districts having to develop Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs) giving particular consideration to the needs of students in foster care as an at-promise population, their successful academic achievement was not generally a norm as 75% of students performed below grade level with 50% of students being retained at least once during their academic career (Koppich et al., 2015). Also, most instructional staff were often unaware of identified students in foster care in their classrooms and therefore found themselves with inadequate resources, a lack of understanding of the impact of trauma, preconceived ideas due to the behavioral and emotional instability of students in foster care, and already set low academic expectations for students in care.

Understanding Foster Care. Understanding the need to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care begins by understanding the foster care system (Lips, 2007). Children typically enter the foster care system when they are considered unsafe in the care of their parents or when their parents are unable to provide care for them (Dozier et al., 2002). Usually, children in foster care have experienced multiple disruptions in their development as a result of traumatic events that have threatened their psychological or physical integrity such as; recurrent physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and emotional or physical neglect (Dozier et al.,

2002). Therefore, foster care is a protective and temporary intervention designed to provide out of home placements to children living in at-risk home environments. The concept is that while the foster care child is in a temporary placement, the child's parents will be provided with the opportunity to seek and receive the help they need to follow the goals established by the child welfare department to be reunited with their child within an established timeframe from the juvenile dependency court.

Children's environment plays a significant role in defining specific needs and how they can be satisfied to ensure a healthy social, emotional, and cognitive development (Steenbakkers et al., 2017). According to Maslow (1970), all human beings, regardless of their culture, have five basic needs that can be arranged on a hierarchy according to prepotency or pressing drive for fulfillment. From the lowest level of needs (the most fundamental needs) to the highest level, these include physiological needs, safety needs, need for belongingness and love, esteem needs, and self-actualization (Harper et al, 2003). The most fundamental need group, physiological needs, relates to the body's need for food, water, oxygen, optimal temperature, and sleep in order to maintain physiological homeostasis and survival. For children in foster care, their well-being and everyday functioning depends partly on being provided with attentive and sensitive parenting in their foster care placements to support a positive developmental turn and social adjustment after having experience neglect at the care of their parents (Steenbakkers et al., 2017).

The second need group, safety needs, includes needs for security, protection, stability, and freedom from fear or constant anxiety. When it comes to children in foster care, most have experienced multiple adverse experiences such as homelessness and traumatic events that increase their likelihood to develop medical, behavioral and emotional difficulties. Therefore,

foster care children should be assessed and screened for medical and mental health conditions by a multidisciplinary team of health professionals to establish needed supports and services to ensure overall well-being and age appropriate development (Steenbakkers et al., 2017).

The need for belongingness and love is the next level described by Maslow. He states that all individuals have the need to belong to and feel loved by a group; such as one's family, circle of friends or school peers. Establishing caring and supportive relationships with their foster families is considered a crucial need of children in foster care. These relationships are characterized by secure attachments, a sense of permanency, mutual trust, and emotional intimacy. Foster parents can create a secure base for children in their care by being available, helping them manage their behavior and feelings, building their self-esteem, helping them feel effective, and helping them to belong in the foster family (Steenbakkers e. al., 2017).

The next hierarchical level has to do with self-esteem for one's accomplishments or achievements and deserved esteem from others, based on one's accomplishments, status, or appearance (Harper et al, 2003). Attentive and continuous positive support is important to ensure appropriate coping skills and self-regulation skills in order to increase better adjustment to trauma and reduce depression of all children entering the foster care system (Steenbakkers et al., 2017). Foster care children need opportunities to connect one-to-one with caring adults to share and process their struggles and experiences and gain understanding that things will be okay.

Ultimately, the highest need in Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, which is the need to develop one's common potential and unique talent at the highest possible level of growth and achievement (Harper et al, 2003). In the case of children in foster care, stability and connection to the same school can greatly assist with completing their education by receiving

continuous targeted interventions to enhance their cognitive development and address their unique educational needs (Steenbakkers et al., 2017).

Consequently, understanding Maslow's theory as the overarching framework for social, emotional and cognitive development puts into our attention that children in foster care have to satisfy basic needs before they can perform well in school and in later life as adults. Initially many children who enter the foster care system may have unmet basic needs, may take time to form friendships and feel accepted in their schools, and their academic performance might be below grade level but with sufficient support from caring adults and peers they can move up on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and reach self-fulfillment (Onchwari et al., 2008).

Social Development

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (1979), children's development is determined by both immediate and distant systems that typically influence each other. He proposed five systems as being key players in a child's development: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem (Onchwari et al., 2008). Through his theory, Bronfenbrenner sets the individual at the center of four environmental systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The *microsystem* consists of units such as family, peers, neighborhood, school, and other direct influences in the individual's immediate environment (Cerezo et al., 2009). It is important to take into account that foster youth experience cumulative periods of adversity that leads to their removal and separation from their family of origin, friends, and school followed by a period of uncertainty concerning long-term security, which substantially contributes to possible functional problems and low academic achievement (Racusin et al., 2005). As stated by Bronfenbrenner (1979), the microsystem includes the immediate environments of children such

as their family, school, and community that shape their personality. For instance, in addition to being the most common type of child maltreatment in California and nationwide, general neglect is the most common reason for placement in foster care (Kelly, 2014). Between 2010 and 2012 about 81 percent of the total number of children entering the foster care system for the first time in California were removed from their families due to neglect, compared to only 10 percent due to physical abuse and 3 percent due to sexual abuse (Kelly, 2014). Some of the situations considered to be neglectful that can lead to foster care placement may include: a mother's need to work at night and leaving her children unattended until the morning, children suffering from malnutrition and appearing unkempt, parental use of harsh discipline, and failing to ensure their children are attending school (Kelly, 2014). Being removed from the home and placed in foster care introduces new factors into a child's microsystem that can negatively impact their educational achievement.

The removal process itself, which involves separation from family of origin, friends, and school, can exacerbate behavior problems by positioning the child in the middle of conflicting cultural experiences and expectations (Onchwari et al., 2008). This is important to consider as it relates to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of taking into account one's past experiences in the learning process (Santrock, 2014). For children in foster care, their understanding of the world is based on beliefs, customs, and skills learned from their home cultures, which usually are very different from those they experience in their foster care placements. Foster parents need to be able to meet foster children at their cultural and cognitive levels and then proceed to assist them to add new learning into what they bring to the table (Onchwari et al., 2008). As stated by Bronfenbrenner (1970), the chronosystem, which includes the transitions and shifts that occur in one's lifespan, should be considered as children must go

through a readjustment process anytime there are major changes to their environment that impact linear development. Therefore, placing greater emphasis on the importance of understanding past experiences of children in care is crucial in order to better understand their needs and gaps in development to be targeted (Onchwari et al., 2008).

The *mesosystem* "compromises the interrelation among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates, thus creating a system of microsystem" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Within the mesosystem of foster care youth, a lack of communication and collaboration between agencies (i.e., school system, child welfare system) and individuals with daily contact with the foster care youth (i.e., foster parents, teachers, social workers, and therapists) can lead to a negative effect on the youth's education by overlooking needs and not identifying needed supports to ensure their academic success (Stone et al., 2007). Service providers must be sensitive to the struggles faced by children in foster care and include them in the decision-making process for services and supports as much as possible to validate their experiences and understand their strengths.

The *exosystem* is composed of "one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). Factors within the exosystem of foster youth that can hinder their educational achievement are structural inequality and racially biased decision-making that may continue to contribute to the disproportionality high rate of children of color placed in foster care along with prolonged stays and slower exit rates from the system (Bowser & Jones, 2004). Disproportionality occurs when a group of children and youth is represented at high rates at various stages of decision-making in the child welfare system than in the general population (Magruder & Shaw, 2008). According to

the California Department of Education (2016), the total population of K-12 students statewide in the 2014-2015 school year was 6,235,520 with 53.64% identified as Hispanic or Latino; but when compared to the subgroup identified as foster care students (64,902) the composition of the subgroup included 54.79% Hispanic or Latino. The largest disparity was for African American students as 5.99% of the total student population was African American, yet 18.41% of the foster care student population was identified as African American. About 18.77% of the total number of students in foster care were White, while Asian, Pacific Islander and Filipino students only constituted 2.4% of the total foster care student count. When focusing on gender, all K-12 students statewide were roughly one-half male and one-half female. Similarly, according to the U.S. Census (2010), African American children comprised 27.7% of the total U.S. population under the age of 18, which translates into 29% of the total number of children placed in foster care. African American children represent the largest proportion of children of color placed apart from their birth families, enter care at a higher rate, and stay longer in the system than White children. Hispanic/Latino children also have higher entry rates, but slower exit rates in the foster care system (Bowser & Jones, 2004).

Finally, the *macrosystem* involves the culture in which individuals live encompassing behavior patterns, beliefs, and all other products passed on from generation to generation (Santrock, 2004). Within the macrosystem of foster care youth, their identification as an at-promise student group by the state of California can positively affect their educational achievement by increasing public attention on their educational outcomes and facilitating the evaluation of current academic supports being provided (Barat & Berliner, 2013). However, there still continues to be a need to increase public attention on the educational outcomes of children in foster care by monitoring academic progress, evaluating state performance, and

increasing the accountability of school districts to ensure overall well-being and success (Stone et al., 2007).

Emotional Development

Children in foster care are often seen as a highly vulnerable group, since they have encountered many adverse experiences before placement that may have hindered their development and in many cases deprived them from basic needs for survival (Greeson et. al., 2011). Even though the foster care system aims to provide a safe and nurturing environment that meets the needs of children so they can thrive, cooperation between foster parents, birth parents, and professionals is vital for successful placements as well as prioritizing permanency for children and addressing any delays they might have (Steenbakkers et al., 2017). As stated by Maslow (1970), satisfying one's needs is a continuous process that, if successful, leads to positive personal growth and well-being. However, when the personal and psychological growth process is exacerbated by adverse childhood experiences, such as those that lead to foster care placement, the effects can negatively affect personal and academic success. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) Study, assesses the effect of adverse childhood experiences as a public health problem (CDC, 2016). This study is an ongoing collaboration between the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente, which began in 1994 and included 17,337 adults enrolled in the Kaiser HMO in San Diego, California. Participants were screened for 10 prominent childhood experiences as part of their routine healthcare at Kaiser and two-thirds of the study participants reported at least one adverse childhood experience such as abuse or neglect, with most reporting more than one. The study found that when children face negative experiences, referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACE's), their likelihood to engage in risky health behaviors, have chronic health conditions, have low life potential, and an early death

are dramatically increased. As the number of ACE's increases, so does the risk for these outcomes (CDC, 2016). Overall, ACE scores, which are determined by the number of adverse childhood experiences, capture the cumulative impact on social, emotional and cognitive development, and other impairments in the function of brain and body systems. In the case of children in foster care, ACE's can be described as experiences in childhood that are unhappy, unpleasant, hurtful, and sometimes referred to as toxic stress or childhood trauma (CDC, 2016). ACE's can be categorized into three different groups happening before the age of 18: (1) abuse, (2) family/household challenges, and (3) neglect (CDC, 2016). Abuse relates to whether a person was a victim of emotional, physical, or sexual abuse (CDC, 2016). Family or household challenges relates to whether a person's mother was treated violently in the home, somebody in the household abused a chemical substance, somebody in the house had a mental illness, parents were divorced or separated, or a household member went to prison (CDC, 2016). Neglect can be either emotional or physical in nature and relates to someone not getting their needs met (CDC, 2016). Currently, around 70% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one ACE in their lifetime and at the most intensive end of the spectrum are therapeutic interventions, ranging from in-patient treatment to regular psychotherapy and counseling sessions, designed to deal with serious trauma (CDC, 2016) .

Foster care is a protective intervention designed to ameliorate adverse family and environmental conditions that may interfere with typical child development by providing stability and continuity of care in family foster homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes where a child is nurtured, provided for and parented (Eseadi et al., 2016; US Department of Education, 2016). However, placement permanency and stability is one of the biggest problems faced by

children in foster care. As stated by Fechter-Leggett and O'Brien (2009), in order to start their recovery process, children in foster care need a stable home that can support their needs. Nonetheless, foster care students are faced with multiple placement changes that are outside of their control and can be a direct result of a court-ordered decision, the opportunity to be reunited with a sibling, age limitations on a current placement causing relocation or the decision of foster parents to give notice for incompatibility with the family. For foster care students, each placement change results in significant effects to their physical, emotional, and mental health. On average, roughly half of all foster children in the United States spend at least one year in foster care, with 20 percent staying longer than three years and 9 percent staying for more than five years or aging out of the system (Lips, 2007).

Providing children in foster care with positive, supportive role models should be a priority for the child welfare system as all children need to feel supported by their caregivers and adults to develop a coherent sense of self-worth and confidence in themselves and reach self-actualization (Fechter-Leggett & O'Brien, 2009; Maslow, 1970). Many of the children who enter the foster care system are already struggling with the reality that their parents were not able to offer safety and be supportive, thus their connections with future caregivers and adults and the support they offer them is even more crucial in predicting positive adjustment to society (Fechter-Leggett & O'Brien, 2009).

Mental Health. Children and youth in foster care typically have troubled backgrounds and multiple emotional and developmental problems that place high demands on their foster parents and caretakers (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Most children who enter the foster care system have experienced some type of maltreatment and are at risk for a number of long-term problems because of the impact of abuse or neglect (Harris et al., 2010). As stated by the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention (2016), child abuse and neglect and other adverse childhood experiences can also have tremendous impact on broader lifelong health and wellbeing outcomes if left untreated. For example, exposure to violence in childhood increases the risks of injury, future violence victimization and perpetration, substance abuse, delayed brain development, and lower educational attainment. Similarly, Cook et al., (2007) state that many children develop psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in response to prior trauma or an accumulation of traumatic toxic stress in their lives.

Unfortunately, the child welfare system generally fails to provide the mental health services required to address the mental health needs of youth under their jurisdiction and most children do not receive even the most basic mental health services, including screening, evaluation and referral (Gilligan, 2007). According to the Child Welfare League of America (2005), an estimated 80% of children in the foster care system have significant behavioral, emotional, developmental, and physical health care needs. Also, children must cope with being taken away from his or her home; separation from a parent, parents, or siblings; placement into a different family or substitute care setting and separation from community. Depending on the length of stay and the availability of care, he or she may face the trauma of several placements. Therefore, students in foster care have to constantly adjust to life in the child welfare system, which can contribute to or exacerbate behavior and emotional problems.

Children enter the child welfare system with tremendous health care needs because they may not have received adequate medical care prior to placement or because they may have chronic conditions that have been poorly managed (Sanchez et al., 2010). In many instances, children have not only been victims of abuse or neglect, but been exposed to poverty, insufficient prenatal care, maternal substance abuse, parental mental illness and violence. Also, when there is

placement instability children tend to lack the advocacy and consistent involvement by an adult caregiver who is responsible for their care, thus decreasing care coordination and delaying treatment (Sanchez et al., 2010).

According to Eide, Shiwalter, and Goldhber (2009), children with poor health have lower educational attainment, lower social status, worse adult health outcomes, and higher likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors than their healthy peers. This is reinforced by the belief that poor health impedes educational progress because a student with health problems is not prepared to fully engage in or take advantage of learning opportunities at school or at home. More importantly, as stated by Eide et al. (2009), schools have long recognized the relation between student health and educational progress and have played a role in diagnosing and treating student health conditions related to vision, hearing, speech impairments, asthma, and mental disorders. There is no doubt that health conditions can have negative consequences on children's ability to learn, thus foster children must receive appropriate and continuous medical care in order to minimize any exacerbation of symptoms.

The importance of providing adequate mental health interventions to children in foster care in order to prevent further development of problems as adults is noted by Fechter-Leggett and O'Brien (2009). Emphasizing early identification of emotional and behavioral symptoms that may interfere with academic achievement, placement stability, and interpersonal relationships is crucial to the prevention of later mental health issues. The literature reveals that evidence-based treatments for trauma, anxiety, depression, attention, and behavior problems should be an essential part of a child's placement in foster care and should be treated as a priority to ensure their overall well-being and positive adjustment to school and home.

Cognitive Development

Undoubtedly, mental and physical health has a profound effect upon cognitive development. According to Erickson's theory of development, children progress through eight universal psychosocial stages that must be successfully accomplished for a person to become fully developed (Santrock, 2004). His first three stages: trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame, and initiative versus guilt relate to the early childhood stages of development. It is understood that if children go through these stages successfully, they develop positive dispositions of trust, autonomy, and initiative (Onchwari et al., 2008). Most children in foster care have experienced inconsistent parenting and neglect that has hampered development due to partial resolution or no resolution of psychosocial tasks throughout their lifespan, thus leading to the development of feelings of insecurity and mistrust which can make their adjustment to a new environment extremely difficult (Santrock, 2004).

Piaget explains the difficulty in adjusting to new situations as a consequence of the disequilibrium that results from new experiences. Piaget suggested that we can understand children's development and their view of the world by looking at their actions and words (Onchwari et al., 2008). Piaget saw development as occurring in a sequence of four stages that through new experiences create a degree of disequilibrium that force an individual to adapt by either drawing on previous experiences to make sense of the new one or by making the necessary cognitive changes to adapt to the new situation (Santrock, 2004). In the case of children in foster care, they can often be quiet and withdrawn or externalize aggressive behavior as they are experiencing a state of disequilibrium by the traumatic episodes that could have caused their foster care placement as well as the new placement itself for being foreign and unknown.

This state of disequilibrium also affects cognitive and academic performance. According to Hartman (2006), as foster children are prone to greater mobility, by the end of third grade one

in six children will have attended three or more schools, suffering socially, academically, and emotionally. Research shows that school transfers can create gaps in the learning cycle. They force children to adjust to new classroom settings, teachers, and classmates and cause children to lose social networks, peer groups, and relationships with caring and supportive adults (Lips, 2007). Children may require four to six months to recover academically from each disruption of changing schools. Therefore, this results in the tendency to fall increasingly further behind in academics and experience more learning difficulties when compared to their peers living in a traditional family setting. Also, children who experience frequent school placements often miss large portions of the school year, lose academic credits, and have incomplete educational records due to missing report cards and assessments (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Many students in foster care have great difficulty adjusting academically and being successful in the learning environment. When compared to other children in similar classes, children in foster care demonstrated weaker cognitive abilities, poorer academic performance and classroom achievement (Barat & Berliner, 2013). It is important to understand that there is no single measure that can accurately portray a student's level of success in school, therefore statewide testing is utilized as a gauge of success in school by being uniform, administered at the same time, and validated against national benchmarks (Burley and Halpern, 2001). During the 2009-2010 school year, it was demonstrated that students in foster care had the lowest participation rate in California's statewide testing program. Approximately 90% of the students enrolled in elementary school statewide took a standardized test compared to only 75% of the total students classified in the foster care student group. Even though the reasons for lower test taking rates for students in foster care are not fully understood, their changes in placements and their high mobility rates partially explain why these students were less likely to be present during

testing as approximately only two-thirds of all foster care students in California stay in the same school each year (Barat & Berliner, 2013).

Results from the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) System for the 2014-2015 school year reported that 18.8% of students in the foster care system met or exceeded standards in English language arts, compared with 44.2% of their non-foster peers statewide. In math, 11.8% of these students reached or exceeded the benchmarks, compared with 33.8% of non-foster students. Foster students also had the lowest rates of participation on the tests. In English, 89.8% of the enrolled foster care student population tested in comparison to 96.1% of non-foster students. Similarly, for math only 89.3% of enrolled foster care students tested in comparison to 96.3% of their non-foster peers (California Department of Education, 2016). When compared to the 2017-2018 CAASPP results, four years since its first implementation and the 2013 state law that required each district to prepare detailed plans on how they were going to serve foster youth to ensure their academic success, foster care students' scores have only increased slightly and remained at the same level for the past three years. Since the 2015-2016 school year, foster care students have maintained a 23% proficiency in English language arts, compared to 50% of all California students. In math, foster care students have maintained a 14% proficiency, compared to 36% of all California students (California Department of Education, 2016). Burley & Halpern (2001), point out that on average, students in foster care score 15 to 20 percentile points below non-foster students on any statewide achievement tests. Therefore, when analyzing test results, it is important to take into consideration that students in foster care tend to change schools more than one time during the school year, participate in special education programs, and stay at the same grade level for more than one year. Also, many teachers and other educators generally are unaware of students' foster

care status and their educational needs, which leads to many trailing their classmates in academic achievement, and not all districts have used the extra LCFF funds to hire social workers, counselors and/or case managers to provide targeted support services to foster care students. As a result, outcomes of foster youth remain among the worst of any student group in the state (US Department of Education, 2016).

Support Services. Usually the health and safety needs of foster students are easy to observe and document; however, educational progress is often more difficult to follow as foster students constantly move in and out of foster homes and enroll in multiple schools and districts (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Changing schools repeatedly disrupts their educational process and every time they change to another school; they lose an average of four to six months of educational progress. Research shows that 50% of foster care students change schools at least four times after beginning formal education and through data collected in California, it has been revealed that children attend an average of nine different schools by the age of 18 (Zetlin et al., 2005). In addition, the constant loss or lack of transferring school records in a timely manner hinders foster students' ability to learn and succeed academically by resulting in a delay in enrollment or difficulty in receiving needed special education and support services.

While the low academic attainment of foster youth may be related to a number of factors, there is no doubt that the experiences of children prior to a foster care placement have lasting and profound effects that many times go unnoticed or underreported. For example, Fechter-Leggett and O'Brien (2009) emphasize the importance of child welfare reform to continue to focus on permanency planning and more specifically on placement stability and decreasing the amount of time children spend in care. Placement instability affects a number of things for a child: their ability to attach and form healthy relationships, their educational achievement, their ability to

have continuity of support services such as tutoring, extra-curriculars, and therapeutic services, and most importantly, their sense of self-worth (Fechter-Leggett & O'Brien, 2009). Children in foster care need access to educational support services to help them to achieve and reduce possible risks for mental health disorders during adulthood (Palmeri & La Salle, 2017). Consequently, children who have many school changes or do not have the educational resources available to them to address their learning and behavior issues have a significantly more difficult time as adults due to a lack of adequate education and life skills (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Placement change for children in foster care usually leads to a change in schools, which is known as an educational risk factor. As Smithgall et al. (2004) suggest, residential mobility with an accompanying change in schools is a key mediator in impeding educational progress. Changing placements and/or schools was associated with an increase in attendance problems (Coger & Rebeck, 2001). When youth change schools often they are at risk of falling behind in school due to incomplete information and delays in transferring educational records (Zetlin et al., 2004). A change in school placement entails many logistical arrangements and potential disruptions for students as records may or may not follow in a timely fashion or be lost altogether (Sullivan et al., 2010). Further, Zetlin et al. (2004) encountered substantial barriers to accessing and locating the school records of 120 children in foster care. For the 25% of the school files that were readily retrievable, Zetlin found that the records only included partial information; 56% had grades/transcripts, 38% had assessment data, 37% had attendance data, 60% recorded number of schools attended, and all reports lacked accurate and complete data for youth with serious educational or behavioral problems. This reflects the importance of making sure that students in foster care are not seen as transients by school personnel who may opt to not invest time and resources to assess the child's needs and provide specialized services due to their

high and constant mobility. Also, frequent disruption of educational continuity may make foster children hesitant to commit to the educational and treatment services available to them (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Continuity can be defined as interactions by adults directed at youth that are predictable, appropriate, and occur over an extended period of time. Therefore, youth are in constant need to know and believe they have relationships on which they can depend and anticipate. Continuity is especially essential for children and youth who have a history of disrupted relationships with their families, experience multiple placements, and who for one reason or other have many different transitory relationships with helping professionals (Sullivan et al., 2010). Schools provide an arena for healthy development for most children and for some at-promise children school can be a place of safety (Sullivan et al., 2010).

In their school environments, children can find potential social support in relationships with school-based peers and teachers, and thus gain protective buffers to the risks encountered at home or elsewhere. At school, a teacher or counselor can meet the need a child has for a caring adult who can provide mentorship and guidance (Reynolds & Suh-Ruu, 2004). When school changes occur, interferences arise with the development of long-term relationships with teachers and peers who have served as sources of social support. Schools can be the most stable and positive component of a foster youth's life and when mobility occurs, children must adapt to a different curriculum and classroom expectations. Sullivan at al., (2010) emphasize that further research can provide needed insights into not only the effect on academic outcomes, but also on such issues as separation and loss associated with school mobility and disruption of an educational program which could include special education services and counseling necessary to ensure academic success.

There is also a need for child welfare agencies to conduct trainings for educational personnel and their own staff in order to develop awareness of the kinds of obstacles foster children face in achieving an equitable education. There is no doubt that educational disruptions could be minimized if children were placed in proximity to their school of origin in order to remain in familiar educational surroundings. However, if a child's placement requires a change of schools then at minimum a greater effort needs to be made to ensure that school records and relevant information accompany the student. School change should be regarded as an event, which places a child at-risk and may call for mental health intervention in an already fragile population (Sullivan et al., 2010).

Disabilities and Special Education. Another effect of frequent school transfers is that school districts frequently neglect needed special education services for children in foster care. The delay in receiving school records sometimes results in a child's active Individualized Education Program (IEP) not being implemented until the new school completes its own assessment and identifies a disability that adversely impacts the student's educational performance (Zetlin et at., 2004). According to Weinberg et al., (1997), many foster children do not remain in schools long enough to be assessed for and start receiving appropriate special education services to address significant learning and/or behavioral problems, therefore counts of foster youth with special education needs are most likely underestimates of the actual numbers of youth in need of special education services.

In the 2009-2010 school year in California, students in foster care qualified for special education services at a much higher rate than students classified as low socio-economic status students and the total population of K-12 students statewide (Barat & Berliner, 2013). Approximately, one in five students in foster care was classified with a disability (18% of the

total foster care student population in California), which reflects twice the rate of low socio-economic status students and the statewide student population. Foster care students had a higher rate of emotional disturbance, which is a disability associated with the difficulty of maintaining relationships, inappropriate behaviors, and depression, at 22% of their total student group. This correlates with the underlying trauma experienced by foster children possibly due to neglect or abuse on the part of their parents, a sense of abandonment, and low self-esteem that leads to challenging behaviors at school (Burley & Halpern, 2001). Also, there was a high rate of foster care students classified with other health impairments such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and mental retardation or intellectual disability. There was an approximate 30% of foster students classified with a specific learning disability that impaired their thinking, reading, writing, and calculating skills. This is important to understand as the needs of all students are addressed appropriately and they are not just seen as "troublemakers" at school. And, children in foster care have higher rates of developmental problems including language disorders, social skills deficits, delayed motor skills, learning disabilities, and cognitive impairments (Sanchez, Gomez & Davis, 2010). Consequently, conditions left unidentified and untreated in childhood can have serious implications for functioning in adulthood as there is an increased chance for engagement in threatening and dangerous behaviors.

Role of Social Workers in the School Setting

The suggested role of school social workers in relation to students in foster care is a practice that has helped to maintain and transfer more accurate records, provide professional development for educators, and serve as a liaison between foster parents, biological parents, and school personnel. School social workers play a vital role in addressing the various needs of students in an educational setting; therefore, it is imperative that the influence of their work on

an array of academic outcomes be better understood (Alvarez et al., 2013). Social workers working within school systems provide services to students to enhance their emotional well-being and improve their academic performance. According to Allen-Meares (2007), school social workers operate from an ecological systems perspective, which emphasizes the influence of social factors on student functioning. Thus, school social workers provide an essential link among students, families, and their respective social contexts in order to address and meet their needs and achieve success (Allen-Meares, 2007). School social workers are often called on to help students, families, and teachers address problems such as truancy, social withdrawal, overaggressive behaviors, rebelliousness, and the effects of special physical, emotional, or economic problems (Barker, 2003).

An essential belief of school social workers is the necessity of collaborating in addressing systemic and individual needs of all students, but particularly struggling students. Therefore, when it comes to students living in foster care, school social workers can help provide a caring environment by facilitating and coordinating the delivery of educational and mental health services to resolve problems and enhance their educational experiences (Tan et al., 2015). Additionally, school social workers can provide consultation to classroom teachers, act as a liaison between child welfare agencies and the school system and advocate for the foster child. For instance, the selected school district for this study decided to utilize their additional funding provided by the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to fund supports for students in foster care by hiring four district social workers dedicated to increase their connectedness and positive adjustment to school. District social workers facilitate Student Success Planning meetings within four weeks of foster care student enrollment to discuss current levels in regard to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning to identify immediate next steps for

addressing student needs. Additionally, some of the main duties of the district social workers include providing intensive case management for all students in foster care; expediting and assisting with prompt enrollment and transfer of student records; conducting comprehensive academic assessments to address needs that could impede an optimal education; working with each student's County Protective Services Worker to ensure school stability; participating in community agency case-conferences to keep collateral members of the case informed of social, emotional and emotional progress; attending educational meetings (i.e. parent-teacher conferences, Student Study Team meetings, and Individualized Education Plan meetings); providing crisis intervention and immediate behavioral support; providing direct services as needed to support the social and emotional well-being and development of students (i.e. whole classroom support, small group counseling or individual counseling); supporting classrooms teachers with consultation on best practices to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom; and providing professional development opportunities to all school personnel (i.e. trainings on Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools, Restorative Practices, and Self-care).

Social-Emotional Learning and Support. Addressing students' social and emotional development is crucial in enhancing their academic success and positive adjustment to school (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). As far back as 1990, Wodarski et al., suggested interventions to support the social-emotional learning of children. In their study, the authors compared three groups of school-age and adolescent children (abused, neglected, and non-maltreated) and assessed their school achievement; social and emotional development in school, in the community, at home, and with peers; and adaptive behavior in functional areas such as self-help, work skills, domestic skills, and community orientation. The results of the study indicate that the problems of abused or neglected children are particularly apparent in the school environment as

identified cognitive deficits hinder their capacity to learn academic functional skills and their socio-emotional adjustment appears to become more problematic with age. Therefore, Wodarski et al., (1990) suggested that supports for social-emotional learning included restructuring large schools into smaller units, promoting cooperative learning through team teaching, establishing on-site health care and counseling programs, and assigning an advisor to each student. Also, they indicate that there needs to be improved collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies, increased funding for school social worker positions, and newly designed special education programs for older children and adolescents in which teachers and counselors focus on academic, social, and prevocational and vocational skills.

There is growing international recognition that education must include all of the elements needed for success in school and must refocus to prepare children for the tests of life, not for a life of tests (Elias et al., 2003). Therefore, well-functioning schools are culturally responsive, provide services to all without stigma and with equal access, and build children's mental health normatively, as well as through intervention and prevention programs. Consequently, it is well established that social and emotional competencies, such as the ability to manage one's emotions, solve problems effectively, and work cooperatively with others, are an integral part of academic success for all children. It is important to emphasize that evidence-based social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions and skills development should occur within a supportive learning environment, as well as help produce such a climate. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2019), previous studies suggest that adding an SEL program is likely to be a wise choice. For example, 57% more students in schools with an SEL program improved their skills compared to students in schools without an SEL program, 27% more improved their academic performance, and 24% more improved their

emotional well-being and social behavior.

Traditionally, current roles at schools do not lend themselves easily to the implementation of SEL curricula such as Second Step, Zones of Regulation, and MindUp. These curricula help foster students' attachment to school and commitment to academics by helping them learn to recognize and manage their emotions, develop positive relationships, and avoid negative behaviors (Zins et. al., 2007). Teachers have classroom responsibilities that limit their ability to execute SEL in their instruction or support others in becoming skilled in SEL. In order to ensure appropriate implementation and sustainability of social-emotional learning that promotes academic achievement, there needs to be a professional (e.g. school social worker) with extensive expertise in coordinating and implementing programs relating to prevention, health, social competence promotion, and character in conjunction to academic missions of schools. Also, there will be a need to reconfigure the roles of school mental health in a way that it involves greater balance between containment/restoration, early identification/selected intervention, and primary prevention/wellness enhancement (Elias et al., 2003).

Students in foster care have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). The researchers also noted that schools can address the risk factors and build protective supports for students by creating a learning environment that includes a caring school community, effective teaching, an engaging and effective program, and an environment that provides all students with the behavioral skills and supports needed to succeed in school. According to Zetlin and Weinberg (2004), California's Foster Youth Service (FYS) program is an example of an approach that focuses on alleviating the educational and emotional needs of the most troubled population of foster children. The program includes educational counseling, resource brokering, maintaining school records, and tutoring/mentoring services.

Similarly, Mainwaring (2015) emphasizes the importance of school-based guidance support staff, counselors, and psychologists to be proactive in creating comprehensive psycho-educational assessments for children with a history of complex trauma on enrollment in order to screen for mental health and wellbeing issues and establish needed supports. It is important to consider that children and young people who have experienced trauma can and do experience a wide range of symptoms and can exhibit a wide range of problems. Therefore, individualized social-emotional services and counseling services at school should be provided to help facilitate adjustment and connectedness (Elias et al., 2003). Also, when supporting students in foster care it is crucial to be proactive in identifying the social and emotional strengths and weaknesses of our students, which can help guide our targeted interventions. There must be a team effort from school professionals to promote learning and development through systematic screenings, onsite services, creating opportunities to work alongside the class teachers to model mediated learning experiences and through advocacy and outreach facilitate transitions and proactive referrals.

Approximately 20% of children and adolescents currently in schools in the United States have a diagnosable mental health disorder and unfortunately, over 70% of those students do not receive the treatment they need (Vulpen et al., 2018). Similarly, Gorman and Conde (2010) point out that involvement in the child welfare system with traumatic and adverse experiences, strongly predicts increased need of services to address exacerbated behavioral and emotional problems. This is important to consider when comparing the outcomes of those who have received services and those who have not; it is difficult to avoid a simultaneous comparison between children whose behavioral problems were severe enough to disrupt the lives of others, and those who have milder behavioral problems (Kim et al., 2010). Further, children who received mental health services prior to age four exhibited more rapid declines in externalizing

behavior problems from ages four to 10 than did children who had not received early mental health services when needed (Kim et al., 2010).

Summary and Conclusion

As the number of foster care students in the United States continues to increase, and there is consistent documentation to support the fact that students in foster care tend to have poor outcomes and face multiple challenges that their peers who are not in foster care typically do not, we need to provide them with a range of additional supports in school to help propel them towards success. There is a large population of foster care students who can get lost in their troubled backgrounds and multiple emotional and developmental problems if there is no access to comprehensive and current resources to target their educational needs appropriately. The challenge for schools is to provide a global range of supports for students in foster care, while simultaneously avoiding stigmatization and singling out students. There is definitely the need to ensure schools are prepared to serve students in foster care by recognizing their differing needs, rapidly and appropriately responding to those needs, and by being flexible in the ways that they meet student needs (Zetlin et al., 2005). Students in foster care are a very vulnerable population that for many years used to be ignored due to a lack of communication between agencies, lack of continuity of care, placement instability, and lack of funding for targeted support services at their school sites. Since the passage of LCFF, California has become the first state in the United States to commit to improving the educational outcomes of students in foster care by addressing the needs of the whole child and ensuring all students move forward in equitable ways and reach success throughout their educational careers.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In order to gain insight and better understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success, a single case study was conducted. The educational needs and issues surrounding foster care students require further research to successfully address the reason for the limited success of this at-risk population. Therefore, through this qualitative interview study, an in-depth holistic understanding of culture and social phenomena was accomplished (Yin, 2018). The intent of this study was to determine information that would assist in enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of elementary students in foster care and allow for a "teaching case" for other districts to learn and replicate practices (Yin, 2018).

The following research questions guided the research effort:

1. What current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

2. What additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

Research Design

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative interview approach was chosen with the goal of understanding a phenomenon within its real-life context from the point of view of the participants (Maxwell, 1992). An interview methodology is recommended to understand how individuals construct meaning of reality and their social experiences through the production and distribution of narratives (Czarniawska, 2001). This approach was selected in order to actively engage participants and keep them focused, to have the opportunity to ask follow-up or clarification questions, and to have the opportunity to hear, record, and interpret voice intonation

and pauses as part of the participants' feedback when analyzing to construct a rich and meaningful narrative (Punch, 2009). The research questions studied represented a case with unique circumstances. The current academic state of students in foster care in California is in critical condition and school leaders need to strategically plan for and assist them in reaching academic success. In 2013, California became the first state to commit to improving the educational outcomes of students in foster care, therefore the study here provided the opportunity to analyze the perceptions of school principals regarding the supports and services currently being implemented at their school district as well as were able to provide information to determine what additional programs and services are needed to foster a positive learning environment and ensure their continued success in elementary school. This research was conducted to ascertain the effectiveness of one elementary school districts' program developed in direct response to the state's commitment to directly address the needs of foster care youth.

Setting

The selected elementary school district for this study is located in Southern California and is currently the largest elementary school district in the state of California. According to Ed-Data (2015), the school district serves 29,600 students through 48 schools, including 5 dependent charter schools and 2 independent charter schools, with a student ethnic composition of 68% Hispanic, 13% White, 11% Filipino, 4% African American, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% Other. There are approximately 10,360 students identified as English learners and 84 students identified as students living in foster care. There are 1,787 certificated employees and 1,696 classified employees and the district has an operational budget of $283,433,031. The ethnic composition of staff in the district includes 36.9% Hispanic or Latino, 49.4% White, 5.5% Filipino, 1.3% Black or African American, 4.7% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1.7% None

Reported/Other (Education Data Partnership, 2018).

Participant Selection

As instructional leaders, school principals are in an ideal position to implement educational supports and programs to impact teaching and learning that can enhance the educational success of students in foster care. Therefore, participants of this study were elementary school principals, based on the fact that they have experience working with students in foster care and are familiar with the services provided to students in foster care by the district social workers within the district. The researcher initially met with the superintendent of the selected elementary school district for the purpose of sharing the intention of this study and gaining endorsement and support for implementing the research process. After meeting with the superintendent and receiving verbal support, the researcher completed and submitted a formal request for approval of the research study to be reviewed and approved by the district's cabinet. Upon receiving formal approval from the district, the researcher sent an email invitation to participate in the study with undisclosed recipients to 30 school principals with the hopes that based on the criteria stated for participation, at least 10 school principals were to accept to participate, thus this being the minimum sample size determined for this study (See Appendix A).

This constituted a purposeful sample of educators as there was only interest in a select group of participants that had certain characteristics that aligned to the goal of this research study (Yin, 2014). Participants needed to be employed by the selected school district as school principals, have prior experience working with students identified as foster care students and/or be familiar with the current services being provided throughout the district for this at-promise student group. The participants excluded from this study were participants who were recently

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employed by the selected district as school principals in the last year and/or who had worked in a different capacity throughout the district with limited or no experience overseeing student services at a school site. These parameters provided unique and reliable information on the current established supports to address the academic achievement gap that exists within the education of foster youth as well as insights on the perceptions of the success of such supports to enhance their academic achievement (Royse et al., 2010).

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected over a one-month period between February 5, 2020 and March 5, 2020. All data gathered were collected in full compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. All electronic files created from the data collection process were saved as encrypted documents on the researcher's laptop that is password protected. Any paper files created from the data collection process were stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home office. The sections that follow provide an explanation for the qualitative data collection methods employed.

Methods

The data collection portion of this investigation lasted approximately one month and eight in-depth face-to-face individual interviews of school principals were conducted. Interviewing school principals was the primary method of data collection as it not only provided insight to their perception and experiences with students in foster care, but also identified their opinion on the effectiveness of the interventions and services currently being provided to enhance the educational experiences of students in foster care who are currently or have attended their school sites.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants and a sample of the protocol for the interviews can be found in Appendix B. Interviews represent one of the most common ways of collecting data in qualitative research because they provide opportunities for the researcher to collect rich and meaning-making data (Frels & Onwuegbuzie, 2013). Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing was utilized to gather data from participants on their perceptions of the current programs and support services provided to foster care students and their insight on additional programs and supports needed to foster a positive learning environment and ensure their continued success in elementary school. Interviews were conducted in person at an agreed upon quiet location identified by the participant. Seven of the interviews took place in the participant's office and one of the interviews took place in a conference room. Since the researcher is a former social worker of the District Social Work Program at the school district where the study was conducted, the researcher's positionality was a limitation. Therefore, in order to avoid influencing the information participants provided in their interviews and to ensure fidelity, the support of a former school social worker familiar with the district being studied was enlisted to conduct the data collection of this investigation.

All interviews began as short conversational interviews and participants were asked to provide honest feedback on pros and cons of the current services provided to students in foster care in the spirit of program development. Precautions were taken to protect the privacy of all participants and an "informed consent agreement", found in Appendix C, was reviewed and signed prior to the interviews. The researcher informed all participants that participation in the study was voluntary. Additionally, participants were informed that their participation, responses, and/or willingness to not respond to certain questions was not to impact their work in any way. The final group of human subjects included eight school principals who work in the district

where the case study is being conducted and are familiar with the district's goals regarding the academic achievement of foster care students. All interviews were recorded electronically and professionally transcribed.

Table 1. Research questions, interview questions, and rationale

Research Question	Interview Questions	Rationale
1. What current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?	Questions 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5	• Multiple sources will support the development of a detailed analysis. • To learn about the educator's knowledge and practices relevant to students in foster care.
2. What additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?	Questions 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10	• To learn about what programs and support services school district administrators believe are most effective. • Data will provide descriptions for the case study to make sense of the need to develop strategies and programs to adequately address the problem of academic achievement for the foster care population.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this qualitative interview study began as soon as information from the interview transcripts was available. In order to increase the validity of the study, the researcher

attempted to facilitate member checking by offering the participants the opportunity to check the transcriptions prior to completing the data analysis. The goal was to encourage participants to make any corrections as well as add any information to ensure that their view points were accurately reflected, however none of the participants wished to review their transcriptions and instead requested to receive a copy of a summary with the results, findings and recommendations via email upon completion of the study. During the initial reading, the researcher completed a manual coding of the transcripts and then coded the transcripts using qualitative data analysis software. Using Dedoose, data were evaluated and themes, patterns, terms, or ideas that added depth and aided in developing a deeper understanding of the issues surrounding the research questions were identified. Through this process, the researcher identified preliminary codes, then after another thorough review, additional codes were added and then converted into common themes and subthemes to enhance the understanding of the information presented to determine strategies and subsequent programs and services necessary to adequately address the problem of academic achievement within the foster care population in the elementary school setting.

Conclusion

Although much is known about the general characteristics, family background, and behavioral and mental health functioning of children in foster care, surprisingly little is known about their academic functioning (A.L. Trout et al., 2008). Historically, foster care students had been an unidentified at-risk population with little focus on the causes of their limited success (Zetlin et al. 2004). Recent research studies, after the passage of California's LCFF, support the notion that foster care students have poor educational outcomes and face unique academic and transition challenges (Evans, 2014). Successful academic achievement for the foster care student is not generally a norm and the main problem is that school district leaders and educators do not

have fundamental information and insight on factors that impact the academic achievement of foster care students and need to gain a deeper understanding of their challenges and traumatic backgrounds in order to identify best practices on how to assist them in reaching academic success (Palladino, et al., 2011). This work sought to explore and better understand what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach success using an illustrative qualitative approach of a new phenomenon. The result of this work will allow school districts to develop strategies and subsequent programs and services to appropriately address the problem of academic achievement for the foster care population. Finally, adding to the limited and emerging research will support increased collective knowledge surrounding the educational outcomes of foster care students.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to share the findings that emerged during this single case study of the elementary school supports and services currently established and/or needed to support the academic achievement of students in foster care. The current academic state of students in foster care in California is in critical condition and school leaders need to strategically plan for and assist them in reaching academic success. Therefore, this research study was designed to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services, from the perspectives of school principals in one elementary school district, are most effective in assisting students in foster care to increase their educational engagement and academic achievement. Consequently, this study also sought to open avenues for determining and placing additional supports and programs into school sites needed to aid in the educational support of students in foster care. Semi-structured face-to-face individual interviews with school principals provided the data for this study.

This chapter describes the results and evaluation of the findings of the study structured around the following research questions:

1. What current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

2. What additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

The results of the study were assessed and identified themes were defined from the participant interview responses. Results focus on providing foundational information to assist school leaders in effectively enhancing current programs and services and/or strategizing on the

development of additional programs and services to adequately address the needs of students in foster care to efficiently impact their learning.

Demographics

Even though the researcher sent an email invitation with undisclosed recipients to 30 school principals asking for voluntary participation in the study and expected to have a minimum of 10 school principals as participants, only eight accepted to participate. It should be noted that a secondary request to seek more participants was considered; however, the timing coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic when school principals were beginning to be consumed by a multitude of other unanticipated demands and issues. The eight participants yielded sufficient data to see consistent trends and draw conclusions. The participants were interviewed using the interview protocol, see Appendix B, as a guide for a semi-structured interview. Through a semi-structured interview approach, the interviewer was able to maintain the flow of the interview and allow participants to expand on their answers when further clarification was needed. The length of time to complete the interviews with the participants ranged from 30 to 60 minutes. There were no disruptions during the interviews and the privacy and confidentiality of all participants was ensured by meeting in a private office or conference room with a closed door.

During the interviews, after reaffirming the goal of the study, to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success, and completing and signing an informed consent agreement, participants were provided with a copy of the ten interview questions to review for 15 minutes before formally starting the interview. The first interview question was included in the protocol in order to get to know the background of all participants (i.e.,

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race/ethnicity, years of experience in education, previous work positions, and current length as a school administrator) and build rapport to make the setting more comfortable. Questions two to five were focused on understanding the participants' experience working with students in foster care, their knowledge of their district's goals and current services being provided throughout the district for this at-promise student group, and the effectiveness of those services. Additional questions focused on understanding what additional information, programs, and services participants considered as needed at their school sites for students in foster care. The final question allowed participants to share any other pertinent information or insights they deemed crucial when focusing on the educational attainment of students in foster care. Refer to Table 2 for participant demographic information.

Table 2. Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Years in Education	Years as School Administrator	Number of Foster Care Students	Service Provider
A	F	Asian/Pacific Islander	19	11	0	P2
B	F	Latino/Hispanic	33	14	0	P1
C	F	Latino/Hispanic	20	10	6	P2
D	M	Latino/Hispanic	13	4	2	P3
E	F	Asian/Pacific Islander	23	15	0	P1
F	F	Latino/Hispanic	17	5	3	P3
G	F	Latino/Hispanic	24	13	8	P4
H	F	Latino/Hispanic	12	6	3	P2

Note. School Administrator = School Principal, Associate Principal or Coordinator; Service Provider = District Social Worker

The majority of participants in this purposeful sample were seven females (87.5%). Hispanic/Latino represented the largest percentage with six participants (75%). The only other ethnicity represented in the study were Asian/Pacific Islanders with two participants (25%). No other ethnicities were part of this study, not by the researcher's decision but by participant self-

selection. This reflected not only a small number of school principals in one small elementary school district but also a limited diversity in this study, therefore making it difficult to generalize the findings to larger populations in districts that include middle school and high school level students.

In regard to years of experience, all participants had no less than 10 years of experience in the field of education. Three participants, the majority of the sample, had between 16-20 years of experience (37.5%). There was one participant (12.5%) that had over 25 years of experience, two participants (25%) had between 10-15 years, and another two participants (25%) had between 21-25 years of experience. Overall, participants did not consider their years of experience as educators to be reflective of a better preparation to understand and support students in foster care. The majority of participants, which accounted for five participants (62.5%), stated that even though they had been educators for a while, their actual work with students in foster care was limited. They stated that before students in foster care were identified as a student group in need of supports to improve their educational outcomes, there was not much discussion of targeted supports and/or services for this population at any district and/or school site where they were previously employed. For instance, one participant stated that she had no prior experience working with students in foster care prior to the current academic school year, not in the classroom as a teacher or as a school principal, even though she has been employed in the district being studied for the last 14 years. Additionally, three participants (37.5%) stated that through their careers they have noticed that in most cases families do not feel comfortable sharing information regarding their students' out-of-home placement and/or status, thus leading to no appropriate documentation available for schools to accurately account for every enrolled student in foster care. All participants believed that within the last five years, through being

aware of their district's LCAP goal for providing services to foster care youth, they have been able to gain a better understanding of how to support the behavior, social and emotional development and educational attainment of students in foster care.

Another important aspect from participants was their years of experience as a school administrator (i.e., school principal, associate principal or coordinator). The majority of participants, which accounted for four participants (50%) of the sample group, had between 11-15 years of experience as an administrator, while two participants (25%) had between 10-15 years, and another two participants (25%) had five years or less of experience. While most participants, seven participants (87.5%), had been assigned to their school site as an administrator within the last five years, they had worked within the school district in a different capacity (e.g., associate principal or coordinator) for a longer period. Their job duties included experiences of overseeing student services at one or multiple school sites as well as of being familiar with the services available throughout the district for students in foster care.

Furthermore, the researcher wanted to get a better understanding of how many students in foster care were enrolled at each participants' school site. The goal was to learn about the participants' knowledge and practices relevant to these at-promise students and allow for a more concise description of the services they have been able to offer to such students through the support from the District Social Work Program. A majority of participants, which accounted for six participants (75%) of the sample group, stated having five students or less currently enrolled and only two participants (25%) stated having between 6-10 students currently enrolled at their school sites. Every participant knew that he/she had supported at least one student who was in foster care in the last five years. Often, participants stated that even though they provided the researcher with the "official" number of students in foster care currently enrolled at their school

sites, they considered that their "unofficial" number was much greater since they are aware that many students do not formally have an open dependency case with child welfare services or a caregiver affidavit that proves they have a stable out-of-home placement. Participants were referring to students living with relatives in informal arrangements between their parents and other family members and that they consider to be experiencing similar, if not more, social, emotional, and academic needs than "official" students in foster care. Also, participants stated that they are aware that students in foster care tend to move often and their number of currently enrolled students has significantly fluctuated since the beginning of their school year as they have seen an overall increase of at-promise students throughout the district after Thanksgiving break and winter break.

Lastly, since all participants receive their support services for their students in foster care from different service providers, the researcher attempted to capture if there was a consistent pattern of experiences among participants serviced by the same provider or if there were discrepancies among service protocols and approaches based on the individual working style of each provider. The majority of participants, which accounted for three participants (37.5%) of the sample group, were supported by provider P2, while two participants (25%) were supported by provider P1, another two participants (25%) were supported by provider P3, and only one participant (12.5%) stated being supported by provider P4. The analysis of the data collected yielded that participant responses varied and when they seemed common it was dependent on participants sharing the same district social worker.

Results

A total of eight interviews were conducted as part of this research study. During the one-on-one interviews, the study participants were encouraged to be open on their true perceptions

and insights regarding the effectiveness of the current supports and services and/or the need for additional services for their students in foster care. The participants possessed varying teaching, leadership and administration experiences. The participants each spoke to ten specific interview questions (Appendix B). The identities of interview participants were not used in this research. Participant data collected was coded to ensure confidentiality and each participant was given a pseudonym. Once completed, the interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The analysis resulted in the following three major themes: Social and Emotional Supports; Consistent Communication and Collaboration; and Continuous Professional Development.

Theme 1: Social and Emotional Supports

The first research question focused on what current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success. The school district where this study was conducted has utilized their additional funding, provided by the state's Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) to fund supports for students in foster care, to hire four district social workers dedicated to enhancing their educational outcomes and academic achievement. As a way to identify immediate next steps for addressing students' needs, the District Social Work Program facilitates student success planning meetings within four weeks of a foster student enrolling in the district to discuss current levels in regards to academic, social, emotional, and behavioral functioning, provides direct services as needed to support the social and emotional well-being and development of students (i.e. whole classroom support, small group counseling or individual counseling), and supports classroom teachers with consultation on best practices to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom.

The interviews resulted in many topics for discussion. Refer to Table 3 for the topics that were most frequently discussed by the study participants and which fell within the theme of social and emotional supports.

Table 3. Participant Responses on Social and Emotional Supports

Topic	Number of Participants that Mentioned Topic
District Social Worker Support	8 (100%)
Ongoing Counseling	8 (100%)
Academic Progress	6 (75%)

District Social Worker Support. Seven of the eight participants stated being familiar with the district's goals regarding the academic achievement of students in foster care. Participants were able to describe how their district's Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) goal #1, which focuses on "improving and increasing access to services that support the social, emotional, physical wellness, and school success of all students," includes the hiring and retention of four district social workers dedicated to providing services primarily to students in foster care to enhance their educational outcomes. Six of the eight participants regarded the support of the social workers to be very helpful. For instance, Participant A stated that one of her students "had major mental health needs" and the support the district social worker provided was "priceless" as she "modeled strategies and approaches" for other staff members to learn and utilize when supporting this student in a more "sensitive" and "trauma-informed approach". Similarly, Participants C and D strongly stated that the district goes above and beyond to ensure all students are provided the necessary supports to ensure their academic success. They identified that through the district's LCAP goals, all students in foster care are connected to and receive

priority for enrollment to the district's before and after school childcare programs as well as for the after school academic tutoring programs. They stated that this is possible with the support of the district social workers through their assessments for needs, communication with teachers and maximization of in-house resources for students and families.

However, when prompted about the specific ongoing supports district social workers provide for their students, Participant B offered an opinion related to the use of funds to sustain one program that only focuses on a few students, less than 100 students, as she felt that the money spent on the District Social Work Program could be better spent elsewhere to support a wider group of students. She stated, "personally, I do not feel that the support and service of having those social workers has been the most effective… what we are spending on district social workers and what the service is that the foster care students get, I don't think it is as effective… if we want students to be successful, there's all kinds of other people that have made connections to that kid, whether it's the school nurse, the principal, that child's teacher… the student's success, I don't think, is only attributed to that district social worker's visit one time a week". Participant B strongly believed that "investing the time and resources for teachers to understand the needs of foster care students is more effective than the current LCAP supports and services" at her district. She also stated that from her experience with several students, "foster care students already have a County social worker assigned to them" and how "she has found that sometimes the foster parents do not want another social worker to work with now at the school level," thus "hindering" the possible relationship the foster parents could build with the school since they tend to feel overwhelmed by being contacted by another provider. She believed that having a district social worker working with her students in foster care, in some cases, represented "having too many hands in the pot" and contributing to County social workers

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distancing from their cases and not being as effective as they could be by just relying on the information provided to them by the district social workers and not getting to actually understand and advocate for their students' needs.

Participant B considered the services provided by the district social workers to be "supplanting" instead of "enhancing" services and supports for students. Similarly, Participant E stated that "it doesn't seem like there's that many foster youth in the district" and "we are investing a lot of money to fund the social workers to support only the foster youth". She indicated that perhaps there should be a way to "be able to extend their impact beyond just one group of students" and "reach other students who are also in need of social and emotional support" as this will be more "impactful and meaningful" when hoping to see "greater gains in academic growth throughout the district". It is important to note that most participants stated a positive correlation between the services provided by the district social workers and the school success of their foster care students possibly due to the fact that the District Social Work Program is close to the Superintendent and most participants could have been reticent about sharing anything negative regarding the program. Participants B and E, who are two of the participants who have the most years in the field of education and as well have the most years of experience as a school principal, were the only participants that vocalized their concerns regarding the support the district social workers are proving and the cost of such support for the district. Both participants indicated that the funds being invested to sustain the district social workers are "too high" for the "limited number of students being serviced" and stated that a better conceptualization of equitable supports throughout the district to support more students struggling with their social and emotional needs should be considered and supported by a reallocation of funding to hire more service providers to be dispersed throughout the district.

These two participants had no students in foster care currently enrolled at their school sites and shared the same district social worker, P1, with whom they stated having had limited interactions in the current school year. It is clear that these participants were vocal about their dissatisfaction with the unequitable support their school sites are receiving from a district program whose purpose is to enhance student academic achievement.

Ongoing Counseling. All study participants stated that their district's LCAP goals ensure ongoing counseling support for all students in foster care. They described the role of the district social workers to include meeting with their assigned students once a week to "play a game, talk or check-in" and "keeping teachers and administrators in the loop" of any needs the students might have so that onsite support services will be able to be established. Participant E, who currently has no students in foster care currently enrolled at her school site, was the only participant that discussed that since she has not had a high number of students in foster care enrolled at her school site in the last five years, her interaction with the district social workers has been minimal as well as the support her students have received. She spoke about the importance of providing programs and services to not only students in foster care and the need to have more qualified service providers (i.e., counselors and therapist) throughout the district. She described how even though she does not have a high number of students in foster care, she does have a high number of enrolled students identified as homeless who have experienced trauma that is impacting their learning. She stated that in thinking about the social and emotional needs of all students at her school site, she decided to hire a full-time counselor to enhance students' school experiences. Participant E's goal has been to target homeless students, who are also an at-promise student group, by ensuring that they receive ongoing counseling support as they are

currently not receiving any services directly from the district such as students in foster care from the District Social Work Program.

Participants acknowledged that students with social and emotional needs that are not being addressed, tend to perform below their peers. They were appreciative of the district's decision to move forward with supporting students in foster care as they understand most have experienced trauma, need special education services, are receiving or are in need of therapy and are academically behind one or more grade levels. It is clear that all participants believe that it is critical for the social and emotional needs of students to be addressed in order to promote educational engagement and school connectedness, however not all were in agreement that the current services being provided were the most effective and in some cases stated not being clear on all services being offered or available for students through the District Social Work Program.

Academic Progress. Most participants (75%) strongly believe that the supports in place within their school district effectively address the academic components for all students, including their students in foster care. Participant A indicated that "there are interventions provided for all students to enhance their learning process based on need… there are tutoring services and extra academic support that students in foster care are given to help them close their achievement gap… district social workers provide this resource for students and their families… sometimes the tutoring offered is provided at the student's home". She also mentioned that "monitoring student data from year to year" by looking at "standardized testing results" as well as "teacher input and grades" allows to assess and determine the "intensity and duration" of interventions needed by each student.

For Participant G, the support she receives from her assigned district social worker for her students in foster care is "extremely helpful" the social worker "actively ensures those

students are appropriately assessed for and provided special education services, if needed" so they will not "fall through the cracks" and their "educational needs or deficits be seen as behavioral problems and defiance". Also, she described how she had a kindergarten student who recently enrolled at her school site with "very severe cognitive disabilities" and no completed assessment and/or special education plan and how her district social worker was able to schedule a meeting to open up an evaluation plan for the student and identify academic supports to be established. She stated that having a social worker "whose job is specifically to monitor" foster students is crucial as it supports with "connecting all the dots" and "making those children a priority for everyone at the school site". Similarly, Participant C stated that she is aware that students in foster care have "a lot of instructional needs" and "to make sure they are successful and ready to learn… we need to provide them with wraparound services in many different areas" as we cannot "try to fix them with some reading program or some math program or some tutoring program… we are not going to have academic achievement unless we build a relationship with them" and "understand what their situation is" as "many students, if not all, want to succeed but a lot of the times they cannot because they do not have appropriate supports set up for them, specifically on the academic areas". She also indicated that there are "administrators and teachers" that once they find out that a student is in the foster care system tend to "begin to seeing them as transient" and do not "invest time and effort to connect and get to know the student" thus "dismissing their needs" and "not positively impacting their learning career". Therefore, by having a district social worker to "remind them of the importance to ensure all students are provided a quality education" supports a "mind shift' that "motivates administrators to establish relationships and connections with their students regardless of how long they remain at their school sites and/or their student group classification". Participants A

and C, who share the same district social worker, P2, shared common responses regarding the their positive perceptions regarding the work of the District Social Work Program and to ensure student academic achievement and success.

Theme 2: Communication and Collaboration

Related to research question #1, another component of the current services being provided in the school district where this study was conducted are the additional duties of the District Social Work Program to ensure student success. The district social workers are to provide intensive case management for all students in foster care; expedite and assist with prompt enrollment and transfer of student records; conduct comprehensive academic assessments to address needs that could impede an optimal education; collaborate with each student's County Protective Services Worker to ensure school stability; participate in community agency case-conferences to keep collateral members of the case informed of social, emotional and emotional progress; and attend educational meetings (i.e. parent-teacher conferences, Student Study Team meetings, and Individualized Education Plan meetings) to provide input regarding the educational progress of students from the school perspective.

The majority of topics that emerged from the interviews referring to duties and/or additional supports currently being provided to students in foster care as expressed by the participants were classified under the major theme, Communication and Collaboration. Refer to Table 4 to see the topics that were categorized under this theme.

Table 4. Participant Responses on Communication and Collaboration

Topic	Number of Participants that Mentioned Topic
Administrator – Social Worker Collaboration	8 (100%)
Communication	7 (87.5%)
Continuity of Care	8 (100%)
Program Process	8 (100%)
Information Sharing	8 (100%)

Administrator – Social Worker Collaboration. All study participants agreed that the main role of the district social workers was to act as liaisons between the school district and County social workers. Participant D stated that district social workers "communicate information necessary to keep the school in the loop of what is happening with students" such as a "change of placement or a need for transportation". He also mentioned that he was not "100% sure of the conversations or work" of the district social workers with students and/or outside agencies, but that "whenever he was able to check-in" with his assigned district social worker any information the social worker provided to him was relevant to "create ongoing dialogue" to identify ways to better support students. Similarly, when prompted regarding her perception of the role of social workers, Participant C stated that a lot of the district social workers' work is "information sharing and kind of putting all the pieces together" for "schools to have a general idea of the students in foster care and their needs" which "facilitates collaboration" by "bringing not only school personnel together, but also outside supports and stakeholders in the student's life" to "create consistency and focus" when integrating a variety of resources and services" to "guarantee their academic achievement". Additionally, Participant G stated having a "strong

collaboration" with her assigned district social worker as she "attempts to connect with her every time she is on campus to see her students" and if the students are receiving special education services, she "makes the extra effort" to "participate in their service meetings to be familiar with their progress. She also mentioned that it is important to "make sure there is collaboration between the administrators and the district social workers" since the Superintendent is "very invested in supporting students in foster care" and every time he conducts a site visit "he inquiries regarding the number of students in foster care enrolled at the school" and "he knows them by name" therefore collaboration "is a must at all school sites between the principals and the District Social Work Program". There was one participant, Participant H, who stated not having a "strong collaboration" with her district social worker and still having a vague understanding of the District Social Work Program. She stated that she is aware that the district social worker supports her students in foster care by "meeting with them once a week for counseling" and "sometimes going into their classrooms to help with classroom activities" but there has not been a "formal meeting or introduction" of the District Social Work Program for her and/or her staff since she has been the principal at her school site in the last year. She mentioned that she "rarely sees her district social worker" and she is "only included in some emails" when the district social worker is "updating staff of case changes" that need to be inputted in the student information system (i.e., emergency contacts or change of County social worker). She also indicated that no information is "communicated directly to her" to "understand the challenges the students might be going through" or to "bounce-off ideas on how to better support students by utilizing the additional on-site supports the school has available" such as "a behavioral specialist and additional school psychologist time for counseling support".

Communication. Seven of the eight participants indicated that more consistent communication between the district social workers, teachers, families and administrators is needed to enhance the foster care student's ability in achieving academic success. Participant G was the only participant that stated having regularly set "check-ins or 10-minute conversations" with her assigned district social worker every time she is onsite supporting her students. She stated that these conversations have been "crucial in ensuring her students in foster care are at her forefront" and "don't fall into the cracks" as she is aware of who they are and what services they are receiving. She also mentioned that having regular contact with her assigned district social worker "helps her make the extra effort" to touch base with her students by "putting a spotlight on them" and "motivating" her to work on establishing a relationship with them and ensuring they "feel connected and cared for" while at school. Similarly, Participant C stated that she relies on her district social worker to "understand and be made aware of what services are available out there for students in foster care" and "if they are getting everything that they are entitled to" because she "does not know that" and families tend to do not "disclosed everything they receive by fostering students". She mentioned that this was highly important as teachers "must know" their students' needs in order to "understand how to support them in the classroom by setting up appropriate academic and behavioral expectations". She continued by insisting in the need for "open and consistent communication" regarding all students in foster care "within the parameters of confidentiality" as she understands that there is information such as "the reasons why a student has been removed from his or her parents" that she understands cannot be disclosed.

There was one participant, Participant F, who stated that she believes that "there needs to be more streamlined communication between the district social worker, the school site and the

foster family… especially if the child comes with supports that are provided outside of the school setting" as this could " help build a ramp for the kid to come into the school already being set for success". She disclosed feeling that in some cases, it seemed as if the district social worker was withholding information from the school and not "engaging the family" in the students' learning process. She stated that even though the majority of the students in foster care at the district receive some type of support, when there were cases of students determined to "not need the additional support or counseling of the district social worker" there was a "lack of communication in explaining if no services were being provided based on the district social worker's decision" or as a result of "foster parents declining services". She stated "needing more communication" regarding the process to determine the specific supports being provided to foster students by the District Social Work Program. It is important to note that participants who voiced their specific experiences with their district social workers, either with positive and consistent communication and/or negative communication and lack of follow-up, do not share the same district social worker. Therefore, differences in the experiences of participants can be attributed to each district social worker having his/her own approach and method of communication when sharing information with schools which reflects the lack of a uniform service delivery process from the District Social Work Program.

Continuity of Care. All participants expressed their thoughts regarding the need to ensure continuity of care for all students in foster care. They stated that there seems to be the lack of an established "protocol" or" menu of services" for students exiting the foster care system and who still require ongoing support at the school level. For instance, Participant F stated that her experience with the abrupt termination of the district social worker services with several of her former foster care students has been an issue. She described how when students

are no longer considered "foster" their services are "terminated without an alternative plan in place". She mentioned that this process has been "too black and white" meaning that there is no slow transition and it seems as if district social workers just say "oh, it's done, we are done with them, they are no longer foster". This was a concern for this participant as she considers that by "having a case status change" does not mean that "student needs change necessarily".

Additionally, Participant A mentioned that students "exiting the foster system" should "if not long-term, go through at least a transitional phase" that will ensure their continued "positive progress" by "slowly fading social work services" until "they are no longer needed". Similarly, Participant C mentioned that she currently has a student at her school site who had been in foster care for several years, with many social and emotional needs and cognitive delays, who had recently been adopted by his foster parents and as the school received notification of his case status change, he was "automatically dropped" from the district social worker's "service list". She mentioned that this was "devastating" for her student as he was "abandoned" by someone that had been seeing him on a regular basis "for the last two academic years" and "no explanation was provided to the student and/or teacher" as the student was "just no longer called out of class for counseling". Participant C stated that "thankfully we have invested in a school site-based social worker that was able to pick-up this student" and "reestablish counseling services" thus "minimizing the negative impact" and "ensuring" the student had another strong adult support available for him at school "who knows how to work with students with severe mental health needs". This reflects how the current support services being provided to students while they are still "coded and identified" as having an "active" foster care case are mostly regarded as effective, however there needs to be more done regarding the current practices for

terminating services to ensure students maintain stability and do not regress by losing supports all of a sudden without a transition plan.

Program Process. All participants indicated limited, if any, understanding of the program process and/or structure of the District Social Work Program. For instance, Participant A mentioned that when she was appointed principal of her school site, she felt that she "did not received a formal introduction of the District Social Work Program" and "how the program works… the things the social workers can do for the school and the things they cannot". She mentioned that since she had "inherited" some students in foster care when she began working at her school site, she just "went with it" and after seeing how her students were being supported by having an individualized support through weekly counseling "she did not think about questioning the district social worker". She also stated that in the last year, the whole time she has been working at her school site, she "has not been part of any meetings" concerning the needs of her students in foster care and when she has "briefly touched base" with her district social worker and has asked about how her students are doing she usually gets the same response, that they "are doing well and adjusted" and "if there are any changes or relevant information for the school to know… I will let you and the teacher know".

Similarly, Participant E stated that due to the "limited time" her assigned district social worker has spent at her school site "it seems they are spread so thin and overworked" however that could just be her "perception" and she could be wrong. She described how in her experience when having foster students at her school site, the most time she has seen her assigned district social worker on campus has been "no more than three hours per week" to service at least four students". Additionally, Participant F stated that there seems to be a lack of a "uniform and consistent way of doing things" among the district social workers. She described how she has

been an administrator at two different school sites and she has worked with two different district

social workers and her experiences have been "very different". She mentioned how at her

previous school site "there was more communication" and a "system to integrate new foster care

students to the school". She mentioned how her previous district social worker used to schedule

"initial meetings" to "kind of introduce the students and their backgrounds" with her, the teacher

and the school psychologist. She stated that this was very "informational" and "provided the

school team" with a better understanding of "what to expect" from the new student and gave

them relevant information to "plan ahead interventions" to avoid "triggering behaviors" that

could "impact the student's ability to build relationships" with staff members and feel safe at

school. Also, the participant stated that if additional support was needed for her foster care

students, she was able to call her district social worker and ask for guidance or for another

"support visit". In comparison, she stated that at her current school site, she has not had any

similar meetings for any new foster care students and the only "support" she is aware her "most

challenging and higher needs student" is receiving from the district social worker is a "half an

hour to 45-minute visit on Monday mornings" and when her student is in need for support any

other day than the day the district social worker is on campus and she calls for support, she gets

the same answer which claims "not being able to go back to the school… because there are other

students already scheduled to be seen and supported at other schools and they cannot be

rescheduled". There is an apparent need for the District Social Work Program to share with

administrators consistent protocols delineating the services provided by the program and the

duties and responsibilities of the district social workers to ensure all students receive the same

consistent level of support throughout the district.

Information Sharing. It is evident that all participants' perspectives strongly focused on the need for information sharing meetings to gain additional information which would be pertinent in the academic arena of their students in foster care. For instance, Participant F indicated concern that for the school district to effectively educate and support students in foster care, the district needs to have all pertinent information. She stated that she has one student in foster care currently enrolled at her school site and the district social worker "does not seem to have a good understanding of the case" and that whenever asked for support or insight on how to support the student or changes on the case, her responses are very vague. She also mentioned that she has decided to become more proactive and she has taken the role of "investigator" to find out more information regarding her student to understand her needs and work with her site-based counselor on setting up supports for her success. She stated that she feels she is becoming the "liaison between the district social worker and the County" instead of receiving that support from her assigned district social worker. All participants indicated that the sharing of information has been lacking between the district social workers and the schools regarding their students and even though they understand that sometimes due to the limits of confidentiality not much background on the students can be shared with them, it seems that unfortunately when there is an increase on their interactions with the outside agencies and County social workers supporting their students, those interactions are centered around disciplinary action and/or academic issues. Similarly, Participant H stated there seems to be a need to formalize information sharing and proposed "it will be helpful if we had regular meetings with the child welfare social worker, teacher and foster parent on a monthly basis" to be "proactive and be prepared for changes happening in the foster care student's life". All participants stated the need for more formalized information sharing as they considered essential for all stakeholders to be on the same page when

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addressing the needs of the students. Also, there seems to be a need to clarify roles and the processes to receive information and maintain schools aware of changes in the cases of their students in foster care and their impact on their education.

Theme 3: Professional Development

The second research question focused on what additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success. In addition to supporting students, the District Social Work program is tasked with developing and providing professional development opportunities to all school personnel (i.e. training on Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools, Restorative Practices, and Self-care). The majority, if not all participants, believed that greater support in the area of professional development for them and also teachers and other staff at their school sites was needed to better support their students in foster care. Table 5 displays topics that materialized under this major theme.

Table 5. Participant Responses on Professional Development

Topic	Number of Participants that Mentioned Topic
Foster Care – Case Types	2(25%)
Trauma-Informed Practices	6 (75%)
Behavioral Supports and Interventions	7 (87.5%)

Foster Care – Case Types. Understanding foster care, which is a 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents and/or guardians and for whom Child Welfare Services has care and placement responsibility, is a complex program to understand and know how to navigate (US Department of Education, 2016). For instance, Participant E stated the need for administrators to understand the foster care system and the different case classifications by

the County. She stated that "some administrators do not know enough about foster care youth and what that means… if we have a clear understanding of the type of placement the child is in then we can get a better sense of goal setting to ensure success at school". Similarly, Participant D stated that there is a need for administrators to receive "information and training on what are the different types of foster students in order to prevent generalizations" as every student has "individual needs that must be addressed differently". Additionally, he also suggested the need for trainings to "help school teachers and other staff… also principals… understand that students in foster care should not be seen as transient" and they should be "invested the same energy on supports and programs as all other students receive to succeed, regardless of how long they might remain at a school".

Participant F mentioned the importance of "maybe some sort of either professional development or an orientation" for all district staff at the beginning of the year with "common things about students in foster care in general, some things they might experience, things to know, things to look for, ways to support them, things that can be done to support them… this will minimize the lack of understanding of what their specific situation is and will help create more sensitive environments". Coincidently, Participant B stated "I'm not sure all of our administrators understand the needs of students in foster care… there needs to be more understanding around building relationships with students and not just trying to fix them by throwing programs at them without understanding their situation… we need to make them feel safe and then we're going to have academic achievement". All participants expressed genuine empathy and, in a variety of ways, stated that they want students in foster care to be academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally successful. However, it did not seem that they have a deep understanding of the foster care system. A better understanding of the system

would help to implement effective educational supports and programs to impact teaching and learning that can enhance the educational success of these at-promise students.

      Trauma-Informed Practices. Becoming "trauma-informed" means recognizing that people often have many different types of trauma in their lives that impacts their daily functioning and in the case of children, it not only impacts their development, but also their learning process (US Department of Education, 2016). At a rate of 75%, training on Trauma-Informed Practices was identified by participants as an area of need for professional development. Only Participant G stated that this school year her teachers and staff received a training on Trauma-Informed Practices by her district social worker, per her request, to increase her support for teachers working with students in foster care. She mentioned that the training was very useful as it "raises awareness in things that teachers maybe hadn't thought about" or "are not familiar with" when working with students that have experienced trauma and need additional support. She noted that she considered this training once a year as "not enough" as teachers need to be constantly reminded of "not taking students' behavior personally" and "understand they cannot handle behavior outbursts the same way for all students". This participant indicated that prior to asking for the Trauma-Informed Practices training, she was not aware that the District Social Work Program was able to provide professional development to schools. All participants indicated the need to make sure that "teachers, staff, other adults, and administrators" understand that when they are working with students in the foster care system or who have a "history of Child Welfare Services involvement" they are working with a "child that has gone through some major trauma" and they need to understand "what that trauma might look like" and "how their whole classroom or their whole school can be impacted by that one student" who has experienced something traumatic in his or her life.

Behavioral Supports and Interventions. Many students in foster care have great difficulty adjusting academically and being successful in the learning environment. The removal process itself, which involves separation from the family of origin, can be traumatizing and trauma frequently translates into inappropriate dysfunctional behaviors that are often seen at schools. Therefore, teachers and staff need to be appropriately equipped to understand the challenging backgrounds of their students and be provided strategies to implement when faced with students needing additional support. Seven participants stated the need for more training on "the ways they can respond to foster students in different situations" and "insights as to why students might act out" in order to "understand where they are coming from" and "be more empathetic". Participant C stated that either through "trainings or books or guest speakers that can talk about foster care experiences and impact on child development and education" teachers will be able to "understand how to better connect with their students". She indicated that it is not just about "changing the way that teachers think about students and student resiliency… because there is a belief that kids are resilient and they can recover or forget their bad experiences, but we are learning that no, they are not" and "that it is okay to provide them with support to get them through their experiences" and teachers "must feel comfortable" supporting students. Also, Participant F mentioned that there is the need to "identify interventions" that can be implemented in the classroom by teachers. She stated that there should be a "live document" created and shared by the district social workers including "recommended supports and interventions" for different behaviors that teachers and other staff could access to "match with observed behaviors" of students in foster care and learn ways to "work with them" instead of "against them" thinking that all of their behaviors are "on purpose and not as a response to a need they have that must be fulfilled". Similarly, Participant G mentioned that from her experience, the foster students she

has worked with have "demonstrated many challenging behaviors such as attention seeking, manipulation, hostility towards others, general anxiety, and sometimes clinginess" which tend to "receive negative responses" from teacher and staff who respond by" disciplining the student instead of understanding where that behavior is coming from" and "what can be done to be replaced".

Summary

Chapter 4 offered insight from the interviews that were collected. Results offered information on the experiences and perceptions of participants regarding the current programs and support services provided to students in students and their insight on additional programs and supports needed to foster a positive learning. The data collected from the interviews were analyzed for consistency among participant perspectives. In Chapter 5, based on the research that was presented, the researcher will further discuss the implications of support services and programs as they apply to ensure the academic achievement of elementary school students in foster care.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services, from the perspectives of elementary school principals, are most effective in assisting students in foster care to increase their educational engagement and academic achievement. This chapter presents an overview of the summary of findings and a discussion in a broader context and its relation to existing research. A discussion is also included on connections to this study and what steps school principals should take when identifying and developing services to enhance the educational success of students in foster care. The chapter concludes with a review of the implications for leadership and social justice, limitations of the research and possibilities for future research, and a brief concluding summary.

Chapter 5 includes discussion and future research possibilities to help answer the research questions:

1. What current programs and support services are most effective in assisting elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

2. What additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success?

The findings of this study suggest what foundational information is necessary in creating strong and effective programs to adequately address the problem of academic achievement for the foster care population: (a) Social and Emotional Supports; (b) Consistent Communication and Collaboration; and (c) Continuous Professional Development. All factors help contribute to a social work program that offers robust supports and services to ensure students in foster care, at the elementary school level, have successful educational experiences.

Implications for Emerging Themes

Although each participant possessed varying teaching, leadership and administration experiences, each of the three themes informed their journeys when supporting students in foster care. The themes have a dynamic component to them, as school principals are in an ideal position to influence and implement educational supports and programs to impact teaching and learning that can enhance the educational success of students in foster care. The three themes are detailed in the following sections.

Social and Emotional Supports. A finding of this research study aligns with the expert literature that indicates the need for a social and emotional component within the school setting as imperative in ensuring that students in foster care are available and ready for learning (Elias et al., 2003). The study revealed that the majority of school principals strongly believe that social and emotional supports have become a required component of the academic landscape for many students and particularly for at-promise students (i.e., students in foster care and students who are homeless). The research study participants agree that, because schools are social places and learning is a social process, students' social and emotional skill sets can either promote or hinder their educational success. Students who receive appropriate social and emotional support in school throughout their educational day, embedded into their classroom routine and climate, are better positioned to build skills that foster their motivation, self-confidence, effective communication, and academic progress while overcoming previous adverse child-rearing experiences (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). The concept of focusing on the whole child and providing wraparound services is an overall belief of school principals to promote student academic achievement and provide a positive educational experience that has the potential to have a positive impact on the life of a student living in foster care.

Participants talked about how there cannot be an expectation of high academic performance from students struggling with social and emotional needs that can range from deficits in social skills, poor peer relations, difficulty controlling impulses, delays in forming connections, and a lack of coping strategies. According to participants, when trying to set up needed support services, they consider building a relationship with their students and understanding their situations as a priority instead of focusing on their academics and trying to engage them in learning when they are not ready to process and retain material. The study revealed that there is a need for more specialized service providers to deliver school-based mental health services for all students and not just certain student groups (i.e., foster care students, homeless students and special education students). According to Zins et al. (2007), the emotional, social, and educational benefits of school-based mental health services are well supported in literature, however, there are multiple barriers to providing access to students such as lack of funding and limited qualified school mental health professionals available. For instance, there were several participants of this research study that indicated having hired their own site-based social worker or counselor to work with their students who might be experiencing high need for educational engagement and school connectedness and are currently not receiving any services directly from the district such as students in foster care from the District Social Work Program. This reflects the lack of funding allocated by the district to employ mental health professionals that could reach more disadvantaged students throughout the district who would not necessarily be able to access services in the community, are not part of a student group currently targeted for services, and that could benefit from social and emotional support at their school sites to enhance and improve their academic achievement.

The interviewee's feedback on the district's current support services is valuable as it reflects the need to reevaluate the current services being provided by the District Social Work Program and make recommendations to expand the role of the district social workers to support other at-promise students in the district and/or increase the allocated funding to hire additional school-based mental health professionals. All participants emphasized how appreciative they are of their district's support for students in foster care as they understand most have experienced trauma, need special education services, are receiving or are in need of therapy and are academically behind one or more grade levels. However, they stated that there is a need for more support throughout the district to identify other students that could be experiencing trauma or who have challenging backgrounds that are impacting their current learning and provide them with supports such as ongoing weekly counseling (i.e., individual, small group, and/or whole classroom) and connecting their families to community resources to alleviate other basic needs (i.e., food, shelter or medical conditions). This was considered a missed opportunity in the district to help close the achievement gap of students and see increases in their academic data.

Consistent Communication and Collaboration. During the interviews, all participants described their experiences with the current supports and services being provided to their students in foster care. Some described a good understanding of the role of their assigned district social worker while others stated not being clear on the role and all of the services the district provides for students in foster care because of a lack of consistent communication with their district social worker. Several participants stated having "inherited" foster students at their schools when they were appointed as the school's principal and not having received a formal introduction of the District Social Work Program to understand how the program works, the services and supports offered and provided by the social workers, and the things they can and

cannot do for students and/or the school. All participants identified the need for the expansion of communication and role clarification (i.e., duties and responsibilities) of all essential stakeholders working on behalf of foster care students as a way to enhance collaboration and promote educational consistency and stability.

The school principals that were interviewed expressed the need for a formalized information sharing process between the district social workers and the schools in order to ensure crucial student information is received in a timely manner to better and positively impact the education of their students in foster care. Several participants indicated that the sharing of information has been lacking between the district social workers and the schools regarding their students and even though they understand that sometimes due to the limits of confidentiality not much background on the students can be shared with them, it seems that unfortunately when there is an increase on their interactions with outside agencies and County social workers and/or meetings are scheduled to discuss how to better support their students, those interactions are centered around disciplinary action and/or academic issues, which could have been prevented if the school had received more information regarding the unique needs of the student during enrollment. According to Alvarez et al. (2013), the suggested role of school social workers in relation to students in foster care is a practice that has helped to maintain and transfer more accurate records, provide professional development for educators, and serve as a liaison between foster parents, biological parents, and school personnel. School social workers play a vital role in addressing the various needs of students in an educational setting, therefore it is imperative that the influence of their work on an array of academic outcomes be better understood by school principals and other key members of the school's multidisciplinary team when working towards setting up supports and services for at-promise students.

There is an apparent need for the District Social Work Program to share with school principals consistent protocols delineating the services provided by the program and the duties and responsibilities of the district social workers to ensure all students receive the same consistent level of support throughout the district. For instance, one of the duties of the district social workers is to provide direct services, as needed, to support the social and emotional well-being and development of students (i.e. whole classroom support, small group counseling or individual counseling), and support classroom teachers with consultation on best practices to deal with challenging behaviors in the classroom. All participants stated being aware of their district's LCAP goals that ensure ongoing counseling support for all students in foster care, however there were several participants who expressed concerns regarding the need to ensure continuity of care for all students in foster care. They stated that there seems to be the lack of an established "protocol" or" menu of services" for students exiting the foster care system and who still require ongoing social and emotional support. There was the impression that the District Social Work Program abruptly terminates services when students are no longer considered "foster" without an alternative service plan in place. More relevant, one participant mentioned that she currently has a student at her school site who had been in foster care for several years, with many social and emotional needs and cognitive delays, who had recently been adopted by his foster parents and as the school received notification of his case status change, he was "automatically dropped" from the district social worker's "service list". This was devastating for the student as he was abandoned by someone that had been seeing him on a regular basis for the last two academic years and no explanation was provided to the student and/or teacher for the rationale behind stopping services, the student was just no longer called out of class for counseling support. Multiple researchers state the need for strong and consistent adult supports

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within the foster care student's life to enhance their ability to be successful, both in the educational setting and in life, therefore consistency and a strong termination/transition plan needs to be put in place for all students receiving services to ameliorate any setbacks once they transition out of any program that supports their development and academic achievement.

Continuous Professional Development. This study also examined what additional information, programs, and services are needed to assist elementary school foster care students achieve academic success. The study participants largely identified the need for professional development for them and also teachers and other staff at their school sites in order to better support their students in foster care and/or other students with similar trauma or challenging backgrounds.

In addition to supporting students in foster care, the District Social Work Program is tasked with developing and providing professional development opportunities to all school personnel (i.e. training on Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools, Restorative Practices, and Self-care), however participants stated having limited offerings at their school sites for this support from their social workers. The interviewees' feedback on the district's needed professional development opportunities throughout the school year each academic year include; understanding the foster care system and the different case classifications by the County, common things about students in foster care (i.e., some things they might experience, things to know, things to look for, ways to support them), Trauma-Informed Practices to help staff understand what trauma might look like and raise awareness and empathy towards their students, general services and supports available for students and families outside of the school setting, and general trainings to appropriately equip teachers to understand the challenging backgrounds of their students and be provided with multiple strategies to implement when faced with students

needing additional support. Participants stated that adequate support for teachers is crucial to the future success of students in foster care. They stated that many of their schools' personnel, including themselves, do not implicitly know about the psychological consequences of being in foster care and are inclined to view the foster student's behavior as related to character flaw, as opposed to a result of an unmet need or adverse childhood experience. As stated by Zetlin et al. (2004), schools can educate their teachers and support staff about foster care, its impact on the child and learning, and strategies to improve outcomes. School is the one common-ground for all children, therefore proper supports need to be set in place to provide vulnerable populations with a chance at future educational success and school social workers are in a powerful position to support schools navigate the foster care system, access resources and act as liaisons when communicating with other agencies, and develop school wide professional development to assist teachers in identifying useful strategies to work with challenging students (Alvarez et al., 2013).

Leadership Implications

The goal of promoting and providing support services for students in foster care at schools also has larger implications for leaders. Research has determined that the emotional, social, and behavioral adjustment to school is just as important as cognitive and academic preparation, and children who cannot pay attention, follow directions, appropriately socialize, or control their emotions often do poorly in school (Ladd et al., 1997). School leaders must create a shared vision and commitment to inclusive education for all students. They must ensure that the staff has the necessary skills and training to understand, identify, and provide appropriate supports to address the differing needs of students in foster care. The school environment should be one that fosters security and stability in which adults model emotional and behavioral limits and interpersonal relations, to enhance the potential for supporting a sense of trust and security in

students (Schwartz & Davis, 2006). Learning in schools has a strong academic, social, and emotional component, therefore we must adequately address these aspects of the educational environment for students to maximize their ability to be successful (Zins et al., 2007).

At the school level, teacher leaders and school principals have an obligation to promote equitable education opportunities for a diverse student population. However, because the needs of students in foster care vary widely and not all students need the same level of service, schools must establish partnerships with caregivers, child welfare services, and students to decide on appropriate individualized and wraparound services. This will ensure a continuum of care for all students as many times schools have limited resources and funding to provide all appropriate supports on their own. Also, school leaders can address students' social and emotional development by integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) practices into students' education through multitiered frameworks such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports that provides a continuum of services based on student needs with the support of site-based mental health professionals (i.e., school social workers or counselors) (Cook et al., 2015).

Social Justice Implications

Within the discussion of addressing the educational needs of students in foster care at schools there are larger implications for social justice. As mentioned in the introduction, recent legislation passed in California addresses the educational rights of students in foster care and directs educators, child welfare agencies, care providers, advocates, and the juvenile court to work together to ensure all students in foster care have access to the same opportunities to meet academic achievement standards to which all students are held (Zetlin et al., 2005). When it comes to schools, they should recognize that a one-size-fits-all approach would be insufficient to support the unique needs of students in foster care because not all students in foster care have the

same experience, nor are they affected by their experiences in the same way (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017). There is a need for schools to better conceptualize equitable support services for all students struggling with their social and emotional needs and focus on reallocating funding to hire more qualified mental health providers (i.e., counselors, therapist, and school social workers) at a ratio comparable to schools population.

Complicating the issue of supporting students in foster care at schools, there are additional concerns with how effective supports will be identified and provided while simultaneously avoiding stigmatization and singling out students. Recent research has determined that students in foster care have strong characteristics of resiliency, however school staff must shift their negative perceptions and low expectations toward support and encouragement to promote resilience and success in schools (Gilligan, 2007). Schools must shift from assuming that students in foster care will be unsuccessful based on their past and should assume that they will be successful when appropriate guidance and supports are provided.

Study Limitations

Generalizability. The limitations of this study include small sample size, narrow geographic area, lack of diversity among participants, and a lack of heterogeneity. This investigation was limited in scope and context as it only examined in detail the experiences and perceptions of a small number of school principals in one small school district, whose students are all in the elementary school level (preschool to sixth grade) with a small number of 84 students or .029% of the total 296,00 students enrolled in the district identified as students living in foster care, therefore making it difficult to generalize the findings to larger populations in districts that include middle school and high school level students. Initially, the plan was to interview a minimum of 10 school principals, but this was unsuccessful because of difficulties

reaching interested participants. Even though the researcher sent an email invitation with undisclosed recipients to 30 school principals asking for voluntary participation in the study, only eight accepted to participate. It should be noted that a secondary request to seek more participants was considered; however, the timing coincided with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic when school principals were beginning to be consumed by a multitude of other unanticipated demands and issues therefore it was considered that eight participants had yielded sufficient data to see consistent trends and draw conclusions for this study. The results of this study were used to describe in detail the case and its context, providing evidence from the data collected that will be useful for school district leaders and educators to identify common and diverging themes associates with the specific factors impacting education success of the foster care population.

Positionality. As a former administrator and social worker of the District Social Work Program at the school district where the study was conducted, the researcher's positionality was a limitation. It should be noted that at the time the research was conducted the researcher had accepted a new administrator position in a different school district. Having left on good terms and maintaining professional relationships, the superintendent and school principals who were interviewed responded positively to the request to conduct the study and were supportive of the purpose of the research to determine the effectiveness of the program.

The researcher's former position provided a wealth of experience and knowledge as one of the designers of the program. However, the possibility of introducing bias to this study by influencing the information participants were to provide in their interviews was a concern. Participants were assured that their confidentiality and anonymity were going to be respected. They were encouraged to be open on their true perceptions and insights regarding the

effectiveness of the current supports and services and/or the need for additional services to support their students in foster care when answering the interview questions. In order to avoid influencing the information participants provided in their interviews and to ensure fidelity, the support of a former school social worker familiar with the district being studied was enlisted to conduct the data collection of this investigation. Lastly, participants were assured that this study was not being conducted as a means to evaluate their school district or their practices, but to identify how students in foster care can best be supported in their educational settings and serve as a "teaching case" for other districts to learn and replicate practices they considered appropriate and successful in supporting students in need of school connectedness to increase their academic achievement.

The researcher also took precautions to mitigate bias associated with data analysis, employing multiple reviews of the interview transcripts using both hand-coding and electronic coding software. No longer being employed in the district and the program may also have served to reduce the bias that would naturally be associated with "ownership" of working in the program. This facilitated the researcher's distancing from the participants, not assuming shared experiences and perceptions as personal attacks regarding the performance of the researcher when having been a district social worker and ensured that the data collected was analyzed through an external lens that provided neutrality and focus on the main purpose of this investigation.

Areas for Future Research

Although there has been previous research on education and foster youth, it has usually been limited to adolescents and not focusing on their academic achievement. Research has documented that students in foster care have shown characteristics of resiliency, despite the

overwhelming challenges they face, but there is little examination on how a supportive school teacher or leader can benefit students by providing them with encouragement, a sense of safety and making them feel valued and connected to school. An in-depth exploration into the relationships supportive school personnel build with their students can help identify the specific skills, attitudes and awareness they possess on the importance of social and emotional learning to enhance learning. Through this process, we can learn how to better support and appropriately equip staff working with at-promise students to differentiate between behavior problems and trauma or mental health needs.

Future research in the area of trauma-informed practices in schools might focus on evaluating the effectiveness of school supports established to alleviate the academic, social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students in foster care. In addition, researchers might use qualitative methods such as observations and interviews with students in foster care to learn about the degree to which the social and emotional support provided to them has increased their connectedness to school and motivation to succeed academically. Finally, there is a need to further explore how school districts throughout California have decided to assess the needs of their students in foster care, what supports and services they have decided to put in place, and if they have seen any type of progress through improved academic performance, increased attendance, and decreased behavioral referrals. Also, since funding in education is always changing and budget cuts are consistently considered and happening across educational settings (I.e., non-profits agencies and school districts), it is important to make sure that any new services created and implemented since the establishment of LCFF funding and LCAP development are evaluated and, if needed, reconceptualized to ensure that students experiencing high need for educational engagement and school connectedness are provided stronger opportunities to

improve their educational outcomes. This will allow the continued appropriate allocation of funds to maintain and/or increase the newly provided supports for students in foster care to continue motivating them to reach their full potential.

Conclusion of the Study

As we move forward in finding ways to better support our students in foster care at schools in order to increase their academic achievement while increasing their connectedness and positive adjustment, it seems to be especially important for data-sharing agreements and collaboration between education and child welfare agencies to become stronger and for assigned case workers to consistently track the educational needs of their foster students. There is a large population of foster care students who can get lost in their troubled backgrounds and multiple emotional and developmental problems if there is no access to comprehensive and current resources to target their educational needs appropriately. Until we examine the rates of absenteeism, suspension, expulsion, and the pre-school and postsecondary experiences of foster students we will continue to foment an achievement gap that will amplify as children feel directionless and disconnected from their families and schools. There are definitely many factors impacting the academic and social-emotional development of students in foster care, however, there needs to be a continued collaboration between agencies to ensure that enough information regarding the needs of a student is shared among foster parents, educators, and social workers. Proper and efficient channels through which educational and health records of children can be shared without delaying their access to services are critical. The prospects for future successes of students in foster care depend heavily on educational achievement, thus they need to feel supported and have caregivers and advocates that can help them achieve their full potential,

develop their identity, and adjust well to society as they transition out of the child welfare system.

There needs to be a continued discussion on the importance of providing all students in foster care with adequate mental health interventions, mentoring, educational supports, and placement stability in order to ensure their success. Students in foster care are a very vulnerable population that for many years used to be ignored due to a lack of communication between agencies, lack of continuity of care, and placement stability. Now, with the passage of LCFF, California has become the first state to commit to improving the educational outcomes of students in foster care. It is a commitment to address the needs of the whole child and ensure all students move forward in equitable ways. Currently, school districts are in the process of beginning to update their LCAP's for a new three-year proposed plan starting in the 2021-2022 school year. They must include specifics on how and what programs and services will be selected, implemented and/or continued to increase and improve the educational outcomes of students in foster care. There is no doubt that a coordinated effort by education agencies and child welfare agencies needs to continue to be worked on and solidified in order to improve the educational outcomes for students in foster care. Fortunately, the last few years have seen important policy, practice, and advocacy advances that address the education barriers and supports needed for these vulnerable students and we can only hope that this momentum continues and students are set up for success, not failure.

APPENDIX A: INFORMATION SHEET / INVITATION TO PRTICIPATE IN STUDY

Elementary School Supports and Services to Increase the Academic Achievement of Students in Foster Care: A Qualitative Interview Study

Dear Participant,

My name is Omar Zavalza and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at California State University San Marcos. I am conducting a research study to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success. The purpose of this form is to inform you about the study.

Why am I being invited to take part in this study?
You are invited to take part in this study because you are a school principal who works in the district where the case study is being conducted and are familiar with the district's goals regarding the academic achievement of foster care students. Findings from this research effort may open avenues for determining and placing additional supports and programs into school sites needed to aid in the educational success of students in foster care.

What will I do if I agree to participate?
If you agree to participate in the study, you will be involved in an individual semi-structured conversational interview. This interview will be audio-taped with your permission and transcribed verbatim. The interview will be a short, guided conversational interview not to exceed more than one hour. You may request to stop the recording at any time and have the entire audiotape or portions of it erased. You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions during your interview. If at any time you wish to terminate your participation in the study, verbal or written communication will suffice as a reasonable notice of withdrawal.

What happens if I say yes, but I change my mind later?
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate at any time, even after the study has started. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study, there will be no penalty, and you will be able to keep any incentives you have earned up to the point at which you withdraw.

What are the benefits to me for being in this study?
Although there may be no direct benefit to you, the possible benefit of your participation is will help learn more about the supports and services students in foster care need to enhance their learning at the elementary school level and increase their educational success. Additionally, improved practices and discussion of needed supports to be put in place could result from leadership participation.

What happens to the information collected for the study?

Your responses will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes Pseudonyms for participants including the interviewees, positions and district will be used to minimize the risk of identification. You will be given the opportunity to review the verbatim transcribed interview. You may choose to eliminate any comments or references. The recording may be stopped at any time when requested by the participant. The entire audiotape or portions of it will be erased upon request by the participant.

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used. All data gathered will be collected in full compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. All electronic files created from the data collection process will be saved as encrypted documents on my laptop that is password protected. Any paper files created from the data collection process will be stored in a locked filling cabinet in my home office. All data will be destroyed and/or erased no later than June 2023.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me? Is there any risk to me by being in this study? If so, how will these risks be minimized?
There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:
- The possibility of a loss of confidentiality given the small size of the study.
- Interviews will be restricted to no more than one hour.
- Participants may be uncomfortable answering the survey or interview questions.
  The following measure will be taken to minimize these risks and inconveniences:
- The interviews may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.
- Interview data will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes. The audio tapes will be destroyed following final analysis no later than three years after the conclusion of the study.
- Participants may end their interview at any time for any reason.
- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering while taking the survey or during the interview.
- Participants may be directed to a counseling or social support services, if needed.

Who should I contact for questions?
If you have questions about the study, please call me at (619) 817-2545 or e-mail me at zaval01@cougars.csusm.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Patricia Stall, at (760) 750-4300 or email at pstall@csusm.edu.If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMATION SHEET FOR YOUR RECORDS

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

Elementary School Supports and Services to Increase the Academic Achievement of Students in Foster Care: A Qualitative Interview Study

Date	
Time of Interview	
Place	
Interviewer	
Participant	
Title	

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. The purpose of this study is to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success.

Your interview data will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes. Only the researcher and a professional transcriptionist will listen to and transcribe the information you provide. The audio tapes will be destroyed following final analysis; no later than June 2023.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and may be withdrawn at any time. If the length of the interview becomes inconvenient, you may stop at any time. There are no consequences if you decide not to participate.

Questions:

1. Tell me a about yourself. How many years have you been working in the field of education field? How long have you been working in this district?

2. What is your experience in working with youth in the foster care system? If you are a school principal, how many foster care students are currently enrolled at your school?

3. What are the goals of the district's LCAP for providing services to foster care youth? How are these goals implemented?

4. Which of the supports and/or services you previously described do you see as the most effective in achieving these goals? What is your evidence?

5. What is your perception of the role of school social workers in providing services that support the success of foster care youth?

6. Are there any supports and services you consider are not effective and/or can also hinder the learning experiences of students in foster care? Can you please be specific and provide examples.

7. What additional supports and services do you consider are most effective in assisting students in foster care achieve academically?

8. Are there any supports and services that you consider are currently missing in meeting the needs of students in foster care in this district? Be as specific as possible.

9. What do you think teachers, staff and other adults at schools need to know to better support foster care students?

10. Is there any other pertinent information or insights that you would like to share concerning students in foster care and how to enhance their academic achievement?

APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT

Elementary School Supports and Services to Increase the Academic Achievement of Students in Foster Care: A Qualitative Interview Study

Informed Consent

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE:

Dear School Principal:

My name is Omar Zavalza and I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at California State University San Marcos. You are invited to participate in a research study to find out more about how children in foster care are affected academically and how they can best be supported in their educational settings to ensure success. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a school principal who works in the district where the case study is being conducted and are familiar with the district's goals regarding the academic achievement of foster care students. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study. You must be 18 or older to participate in the study.

KEY INFORMATION ABOUT THIS RESEARCH STUDY:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to be a part of this study. Information that is more detailed is listed later on in this form.

The purpose of this study is to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success. You will be asked to complete an individual semi-structured conversational interview. This interview will be audio-taped with your permissions and transcribed verbatim. We expect that you will be in this research study for no longer than one hour. The primary risk of participation is possible loss of confidentiality given the small size of the study. The main benefit is helping to *determine what additional information, programs, and services are needed to foster a positive learning environment and ensure the continued success of students in foster care in the elementary school level.*

STUDY PURPOSE:

The purpose of this study is to gain insight and develop a deeper understanding of what supports and services are most effective in assisting elementary school students in foster care reach academic success. Findings from this research effort may open avenues for determining and placing additional supports and programs into school sites needed to aid in the educational success of students in foster care.

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:

If you agree to participate, you will be one of 10 participants who will be participating in this research.

PROCEDURES FOR THE STUDY:

If you agree to be in the study, you will do the following:

You will be involved in an individual semi-structured conversational interview. This interview will be audio-taped with your permission and transcribed verbatim. The interview will be a short, guided conversational interview not to exceed more than one hour. You may request to stop the recording at any time and have the entire audiotape or portions of it erased. You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions during your interview. If at any time you wish to terminate your participation in the study, verbal or written communication will suffice as a reasonable notice of withdrawal. There is no consequence or loss of benefit for terminating participation.

RISKS AND INCONVENIENCES:
There are minimal risks and inconveniences to participating in this study. These include:
- The possibility of a loss of confidentiality given the small size of the study.
- Interviews will be restricted to no more than one hour.
- Participants may be uncomfortable answering the interview questions.

SAFEGUARDS:
To minimize these risks and inconveniences, the following measures will be taken:
- The interviews may be scheduled at a time that is convenient to the participant and at a place that is private.
- Interview data will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes. The audio tapes will be destroyed following final analysis no later than three years after the conclusion of the study.
- Participants may end their interview at any time for any reason.
- Participants can skip any questions that they feel uncomfortable answering during the interview.
- Participants may be directed to a counseling or social support services, if needed.

CONFIDENTIALITY:
Your responses will be kept confidential, available only to the researcher for analysis purposes. Pseudonyms for participants including the interviewees, positions and district will be used to minimize the risk of identification. You will be given the opportunity to review the verbatim transcribed interview. You may choose to eliminate any comments or references. The recording may be stopped at any time when requested by the participant. The entire audiotape or portions of it will be erased upon request by the participant.

The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name or any other identifiable information will not be used. All data gathered will be collected in full compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. All electronic files created from the data collection process will be saved as encrypted documents on my laptop that is password protected. Any paper files created from the data collection process will be stored in a locked filling cabinet in my home office. All data will be destroyed and/or erased no later than June 2023.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION:
Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part or may leave the study at any time. Leaving the study will not result in any penalty. Your decision whether or not to

participate in this study will not affect your current or future relations with California State University San Marcos.

BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THE STUDY:
There are no direct benefits to participation in this study, however, your participation will help learn more about the supports and services students in foster care need to enhance their learning at the elementary school level and increase their educational success. Additionally, improved practices and discussion of needed supports to be put in place could result from leadership participation.

PAYMENT OR INCENTIVE:
You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

CONTACT INFORMATION:
If you have questions about the study, please call me at (619) 817-2545 or e-mail me at zaval01@cougars.csusm.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Patricia Stall, at (760) 750-4300 or email at pstall@csusm.edu. You will be given a copy of this form for your records. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the IRB Office at irb@csusm.edu or (760) 750-4029.

PARTICIPANT'S CONSENT:
By signing below, you are giving consent to participate in the study. As part of this project, an audio recording will be made of you during your participation in this research project. Please check the option below that applies to you before signing.

☐ I give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

☐ I do not give permission for my interview to be audio taped.

Name of the Participant: _____

Signature of the Participant: _____

Date: _____

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