ACCEPTANCE

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Belinda Dunnick Karge, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

Catherine Webb, Ed.D.
Committee Member

Gregory Merwin, Ed.D.
Committee Member

The Dissertation Committee, the Dean, and Executive Director of the Doctor of Education Program of the School of Education, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

Deborah Mercier, PhD
Dean

Dwight Doering, PhD
Executive Director of the Doctor of Education Program

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Keri Kimes
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1530 Concordia West
Address

3/18/2019
Date

Irvine, CA 92612
City/State/Zip

keri.kimesdavis@eagles.cui.edu
Phone Number or E-mail address

VITA

Keri L. Kimes

ADDRESS 1530 Concordia West
Irvine, CA 92612
keri.kimesdavis@eagles.cui.edu

EDUCATION

EdD	2019	Concordia University Irvine Educational Leadership
MA	2005	Pepperdine University, Malibu Education
BA	2004	California State University, Fullerton English

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

2015 – 2019	Assistant Principal El Modena High School Orange Unified School District
2006 – 2015	English Teacher Tustin High School Tustin Unified School District

TRAUMA INFORMED INTERVENTIONS: SUPPORTING FOSTER YOUTH THROUGH AN ON-SITE MENTORSHIP PROGRAM IN THE SECONDARY EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

by

Keri L. Kimes

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership
May 4, 2019

School of Education
Concordia University Irvine

ABSTRACT

Youth in foster care experience significant deficits in their educational journey due to their experienced trauma and involvement in the child welfare system. The unique challenges for this at-risk group include lags in academic progress, increased disciplinary and special education referrals, frequent mobility and transition in home and educational settings, and decreased opportunities for post-secondary education and employment. This study looks at these needs through the lens of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, that through fulfillment of lower-tier basic and psychological needs foster youth will reach the upper tier of self-actualization where learning can take place. Based on the idea that all foster youth have experienced some level of trauma, with many having experienced moderate to severe trauma, the researcher aimed to determine the types of trauma informed interventions which best met the needs of youth in foster care with a specific focus on an existing mentorship program. This study intended to determine whether this form of intervention adequately met the social-emotional and academic needs of foster youth. To this end, surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews were conducted with primary stakeholder groups of teachers, mentors, foster parents, and former foster youth over the age of 18. The results demonstrate positive effects from an on-site staff mentor, as long as they receive sufficient training in the specific needs of foster youth and understand the importance of confidentiality. With these concerns addressed, mentorship programs serve the unique needs of foster youth within the secondary academic setting.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As I reflect on my personal, professional, and educational journey, I am keenly aware that the support, guidance, and wisdom of others have been key to my success.

To my dissertation committee members, Dr. Merwin and Dr. Webb – Thank you for your feedback and advice as I created, conducted, and analyzed my study. Your knowledge and support have been invaluable. To my committee chair, Dr. Karge – thank you for taking me under your wing and protecting and nurturing me through this process. Your patience, suggestions, and leadership have helped me grow and I leave Concordia a stronger leader due to your influence. To Dr. Doering and the Concordia Educational Leadership Faculty – thank you for sharing your passion for education with us.

To my Irvine 5 + Stockton 2 cohort – thank you for being there for the roller coaster ride that was our Ed.D. Justin – thank you for suggesting my theoretical framework; you changed my entire focus in such a positive way. Cynthia – thank you for being my partner on projects, my friend, and my sounding board. We've connected as students, educators, women, and moms, and I truly value your opinions and appreciate your support.

To Allison Davis-Maxon – thank you for the years of training and sharing your expertise on foster and adoption. I know my family and many others have benefited from your loving wisdom. To Cat and Diana – from support group to brunch to Thanksgiving vacation…you have improved my world and you went through the worst of the foster world with me. Thank you for supporting me in the darkest of days.

To my fellow administrators: Maureen Eckholdt, CK Green, Susan Hemans, Julie Lucas, and Julie McNealy – thank you for setting a positive example of student-centered school leadership. You've taught me more than you can possibly realize, and I am grateful for your

contributions to my work. To Dustin Saxton – thank you for demonstrating what true leadership looks like. Thank you for helping me understand that laughter belongs in leadership, and that sometimes the small things you do can have the biggest impact. You've helped me learn not to always take myself, and life, too seriously. Thank you for believing in me.

My friends have supported me through this process; without their advice, encouragement, suggestions, and patience I would not have completed this program. Kristine Nelson – thank you for creating a program to help our kids that informed much of my study. Erin Harty – thank you for your unwavering support and enthusiasm. You believed in me in my moments of doubt and convinced me to keep going. Mike Bartetzko – thank you for watching the kid, helping me practice, reading my drafts, and supporting both me and the kid through this and our lives. Jenn Beall – you are the best friend a girl could ask for. I know I can call you anytime day or night, and you'll talk me off the ledge. Thank you for your love and support for the past fifteen years.

To my sister, Rebecca Kimes – thank you for putting up with random calls and texts about my classes and dissertation, and for believing that a high school dropout can actually finish a Doctorate. To my mom, Jean Kimes – I know you've been watching over me and I hope I've made you proud. To my husband, Grant Davis – thank you for understanding all the times I had to study or write, and supporting my dream of finishing this program. To my son, Xavier Davis – you are the best part of my world, and the reason I do everything. Thank you for reminding me to do my homework so I don't get in trouble and for inspiring me daily by being an amazing person.

To the countless others who have supported my journey and filled my life with laughter and love – thank you.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Students involved in the foster care system face significant challenges in realizing academic success (Berliner & Lezin, 2012; Calix, 2009). They are more likely to face disciplinary consequences, fall behind in grade level, qualify for Special Education services, repeat academic years and typically have access to fewer resources and informed advocates to intervene on their behalf (Berliner & Lezin, 2012; Lustig, 2008; Morton, 2015). When compared with their peers, foster youth record lower graduation rates, lower likelihood of obtaining post-secondary education, and a higher risk for future incarceration and health and welfare support (Morton, 2015). The disparity in academic and post-secondary opportunities between foster youth and their peers demonstrates a need for increased attention on the specific needs of this specific subgroup (Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh 2016; Barker, Kerr, Dong, Wood, & DeBeck, 2017).

When removing children from their homes, safety is of primary concern. However, once safety is established, the priority should shift to stability and the importance of educational opportunities. Unfortunately, this does not always occur due to limited resources and understanding of social-emotional and educational needs of foster youth (Chambers & Palmer, 2010). Foster youth initially taken into care often experience a variety of foster placements in the first months after removal from their home of origin, which often also results in an uneven school experience as they enroll and dis-enroll at a rapid pace, frequently moving between schools with different instructional priorities and grade-level curriculum (Chambers & Palmer, 2010). Attention to this educational mobility and the impact on academic achievement is necessary to support foster youth in meeting their scholastic objectives.

Within the state of California, legislation directs funding to foster youth as a significant subgroup and requires school districts to address the specific needs of these students (Hill & Ugo, 2015). With the implementation of this change in funding and accountability, schools must analyze current practices and determine interventions to meet the complex and varied needs of students involved in foster care. Within this pursuit of educational support, attention must fall on the importance of trauma informed interventions for the social emotional benefit of the foster student as "the majority of children entering foster care have experienced multiple traumas, making this a vulnerable population with an increased risk for emotional and behavioral problems" (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014, p. 7). Addressing that trauma in a pro-social-emotional and therapeutic manner will assist foster youth in achieving feelings of safety, which subsequently allows them the opportunity to pursue their academic potential.

Statement of the Problem

Foster youth lack stability in their personal and academic lives and often experience low academic achievement as a result. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, unless and until basic needs such as safety, security, and belonging are met, humans are incapable of reaching higher levels that would allow for academic potential and benefit from educational opportunities (Pichere, 2015). While many of the factors that negatively impact foster youth fall beyond the scope and influence of the public education system, the importance of trauma informed interventions to support the unique needs of this impacted population are within the purview of a school site and district (Berliner & Lezin, 2012). With this type of focus, these at-risk students would benefit from social-emotional support to allow opportunities for academic success.

One such intervention is a mentorship program, which would pair a youth with an on-site staff member who works as an advocate and a stable adult role model (Johnson, Pryce, &

Martinovich, 2011). Many foster youth indicate unfamiliarity with resources available through their schools; at the secondary level, this includes lack of access to college applications and completing forms to qualify for financial aid (Frerer, 2011). An on-site mentor recognizes these needs and connects the foster youth with resources to fulfill both their current and potential academic pursuits. This type of program also addresses the lower level needs as identified by Maslow, allowing students to progress up to levels when academic achievement becomes a possibility (Osterling, 2006; Lester, 1983).

Substantial literature explores the academic achievement of foster youth, but little exists regarding the influence of a stable mentor to guide students through their school experiences and how this addresses Maslow's lower-level social and emotional needs. This study focuses on the implementation of a trauma informed intervention with a specific analysis of an existing mentorship program, the training necessary to ensure on-site staff are prepared to deal with the behaviors and experiences of foster youth, and the academic impact such interventions have on foster youth in the secondary setting. Former foster youth were a critical voice in the research process as their views on beneficial supports within secondary education informed much of the research process. For the purpose of this research, interventions focused on a mentorship program will be generally defined as staff members paired with foster youth (Creswell, 2012).

Significance of the Study

This study examines a specific intervention to address both the psychological and educational needs of students within the foster care system. For the purpose of this study, psychological needs relate to the lower level needs defined by Maslow as safety, security, and belonging. Without addressing these areas, students are incapable of accessing educational opportunities in meaningful ways. Students involved with social services require positive

interactions with adult role models, as "positive emotional and social relationships are pivotal in the formation of a secure sense of self" (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2010, p. 216). These youth have experienced trauma and schools must address this to fully support students' access to academic opportunities that help them to fulfill their potential.

In their study of mentorship programs, Scannapieco and Painter (2013) cited a need for training responsive adults. The unique circumstances of foster youth often create behavioral and/or emotional concerns, and these concerns need to be addressed by competent adults. Scannapieco and Painter (2013) found that "training, supervision, and support should include how to intervene with a youth experiencing a behavioral or emotional problem, as these youth should not be discharged or excluded from receiving mentoring" (p. 179). This recommendation led to the decision to focus on training school staff as a primary component for this study. Since foster youth have suffered trauma and extensive negative experiences, the likelihood increases for behavioral and social challenges (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). School staff must have an understanding of the underlying causes of these situations and the resources to support foster youth in a variety of situations. Staff must also understand the unique position of foster youth, specifically that "without much thought, foster youth are asked every day to trust people, even after years of experiences that have taught them that people are not to be trusted. When they show caution, they are categorized as resistant and defiant" (Ruff & Baron, 2012, p. 389). For interventions to effectively meet the social and emotional needs of foster youth, staff need ongoing, consistent training to understand the importance of investing time and emotion to developing relationships with foster youth, even when it feels hopeless and daunting. An understanding of the impact of trauma on trust and relationship development is crucial for adults invested in creating positive connections with these at-risk students.

While limited research exists on staff mentors to support foster youth in the educational setting, many studies have been done on the barriers to academic achievement, the need to address lower-level needs, and the importance of a stable adult in the life of a foster child. In recent years, there has been an increased focus on trauma informed educational practices and social-emotional learning needs. Therefore, this study aims to tie together these essential components through trauma informed interventions dedicated to foster youth.

About the Researcher

The researcher of this study received initial foster parent certification in 2007 and has worked with foster youth and associated agencies for the past ten years. She has one son who was adopted from foster care, and she oversees foster youth in her role as an assistant principal at a high school. In addition to required foster parent trainings, the researcher has extensively studied attachment theory, and *Love and Logic Parenting* as presented by Foster Cline and Jim Fay (2009). She has presented on attachment theory and the unique needs of foster youth, and works within her school district to identify and provide interventions to help students in foster care realize academic success.

Definition of Terms

The following list of terms is provided to clarify the study of foster youth and mentorship programs. This mixed methods study relied heavily on existing research, personal experiences of the researcher, and associations with organizations responsible for the overall care and success of foster youth.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (*ACE): "*physical or emotional abuse or neglect, sexual abuse, domestic violence, substance abuse or mental illness in the home, parental separation or

divorce, having an incarcerated household member, and not being raised by both biological parents" (Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis, 2017, p. 108).

Attachment: Attachment is the bond children make with their primary caregivers. When this bond is not developed in a healthy manner, or when this attachment is disrupted, trauma occurs. Children in foster care often have disrupted or insecure attachment skills which impact their ability to function on social and emotional levels. (Davis-Maxon, 2015).

Educational Rights Holder: An Educational Rights Holder (ERH) is the person granted authority by the court system to make educational rights on behalf of the foster youth. Oftentimes, birth parents retain ERH after removal but may be unable or unwilling to participate in the educational process. When this happens, or when the court deems it in the best interest of the child to sever the educational rights of the birth parents, another responsible adult is sought to make these decisions. (Chambers, 2010; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012)

Foster Parent: A foster parent is a trained, licensed individual (or individuals) who assumes daily care for a child in the foster care system. They often have limited information on the child's past and restricted decision-making power due to the nuances of the child welfare system. (Nelson, 2018)

Foster Youth: A child who has been removed from their home of origin due to abuse and/or neglect. This youth becomes the responsibility of the state and local government through social services and/or child welfare agencies. (Nelson, 2018)

Group Home Care: Foster youth in group home care reside in a multi-child facility which is operated by paid, trained staff. Attempts are made to replicate a family structure within the home setting. (McRae, Lee, Barth & Rauktis, 2010; Nelson, 2018)

Home of Origin: A child's home of origin is the family dwelling from which they were removed. This may take a variety of forms and may not be a traditional "home" setting. (Zetlin, 2010).

Kinship Care: Kinship care refers to a child under the legal protection of the local child welfare system residing with a relative or family friend. This person may or may not have received training on the unique needs of children who have experienced trauma. (Davis-Maxon, 2015).

Mentor: Within this study, a mentor is an on-site staff member at the foster youth's school of attendance who has agreed to support the student academically, socially, and emotionally. (Nelson, 2018).

Psychosocial: The relationship between emotions and corresponding behavioral responses to social factors and/or situations. (Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis, 2017).

Social-Emotional Learning: Learning focused on pro-social skills such as social interactions, stress management, coping strategies, and positive decision making. (Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh, 2016).

Stable Adult: For the purpose of this study, a stable adult refers to an adult in the life of a foster child who maintains consistency in presence, support, and attitude. (Nelson, 2018).

Transition: Transitions occur anytime a change happens to a foster child. These include, but are not limited to, changes in home placement (both address and type of residence), educational placement, introduction of new members into the household, and change of agency workers such as social workers, therapists, etc. (Davis-Maxon, 2015).

Trauma: "Trauma is a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, one that induces an abnormally intense and prolonged stress response" (NC

Division of Social Services, 2005). All children in foster care have experienced some level of trauma.

Trauma-Informed Interventions: Evidence based interventions explicitly designed to support victims of experienced trauma. (Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis, 2017)

Trauma-Informed Practices: Specific interventions, ideally provided without the school setting, that provide students with the tools and internal resources necessary to co-exist with their trauma and learn skills to mitigate the extent to which past trauma influences their lives. (Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which is represented by a pyramid (Figure 1). The basic physiological and safety needs must be met before addressing the higher level needs.

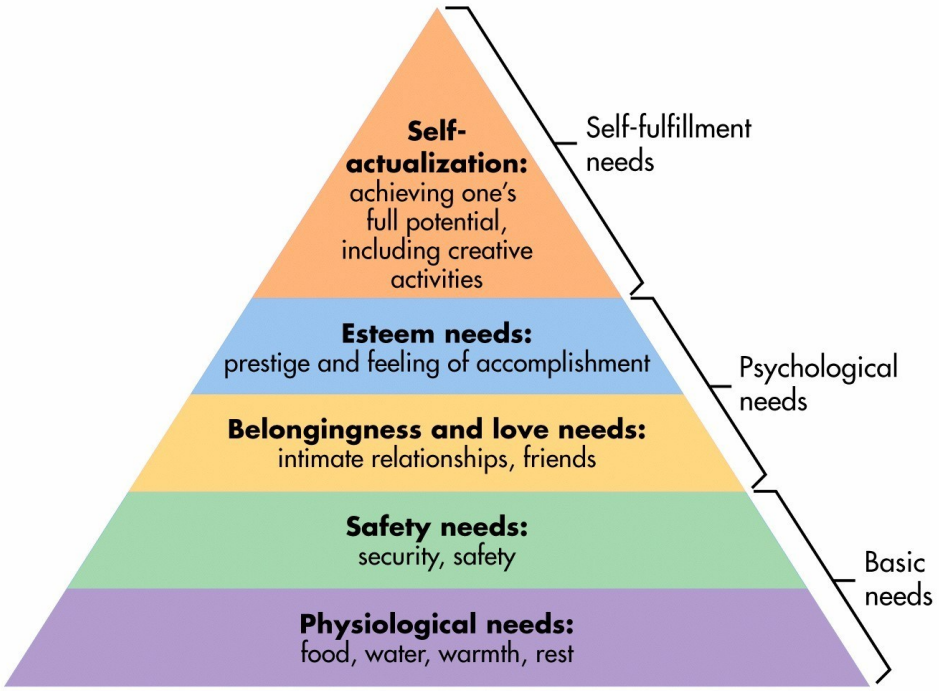

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
McLeod, S. (2017). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html

Foster youth often lack the basic physiological needs, which results in their removal from their home of origin and subsequent foster care placement. However, according to Maslow, an individual must feel confident in the lower levels of the pyramid before advancing. Therefore, a foster youth struggling with either basic or psychological needs would be unable to move to self-fulfillment needs, and academic success only happens at this top level. Working within this pyramid of needs as a theoretical framework, this study focuses on meeting the lower level needs through trauma informed interventions to help foster youth advance up the pyramid to self-fulfillment.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed to determine the effectiveness of trauma informed interventions for foster youth.

1. How does the implementation of an on-site mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development within secondary education?
2. What types of training and support are necessary for secondary school staff to effectively support the unique social-emotional needs of foster youth?
3. According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?

Limitations

This study has the following limitations:

1. As a highly protected group, specific data on foster youth is difficult to obtain and utilize.
2. The sample was completed from within a single school district. Although this district has a higher than average number of foster youth due to its proximity to the county

seat and headquarters of the county social services office, the study size is limited to five high schools and three middle schools.

3. There are variables beyond the control of the researcher, such as changes of placement for foster youth, which limit the longevity of mentor partnerships and sustainability of interventions.

Delimitations

The delimitations within this study were defined by access to participants, both students and staff members. As a high school assistant principal, the researcher had direct access to one specific school site and relationships with other site administrators and the district Foster Youth Liaison which allowed for interactions and study at a variety of sites within a single school district. The researcher decided to focus on students within the secondary range of academics (grades 7-12) in order to specifically study student engagement, academic achievement, and effectiveness of an on-site mentor within the secondary setting. With the focus on staff training specific to trauma of paramount importance, the researcher also determined to limit the number of school sites to ensure adequate personalized training for each of the staff as previous attempts at similar programs have failed due to lack of resources (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013).

Assumptions

This study included the following assumptions: (a) foster youth would benefit from a positive mentoring relationship; (b) foster youth would be receptive to the introduction of a mentor (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011); (c) staff members would be willing to serve as mentors to at-risk youth and provide trauma informed interventions; and (d) social, emotional, and educational support led to increased measurable academic achievement.

Organization of Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the background of the study, statement of the problem, significance of the study, author information, a definition of terms, description of the theoretical framework, research questions, limitations, delimitations, and assumptions.

Chapter 2 reviews literature as it pertains to prevailing components of this study, to include legislation, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, trauma informed interventions, foster youth experiences, and educational needs and potential outcomes. Chapter 3 describes the methodology utilized in this study to include the implementation of trauma informed interventions for foster youth, the selection and training of staff members to serve as mentors, instrumentation, and procedures for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 offers the findings of the study to include demographic information of both student and staff participants, testing the research questions, confirmatory factor analysis, and the data analyses for the research questions. Chapter 5 provides an overall summary of the study, implications and recommendations to continue supporting foster youth within the secondary educational setting.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature regarding the educational experiences of foster youth revealed a significant divide between the academic achievements of foster youth and their typical peers (Calix, 2009). "By almost any measure, children and youth in foster care fall behind their classmates early in their education trajectories. Over time, this gap widens, with predictably dismal results" (Berliner & Lezin, 2012, pp. 1-2). These gaps form due to the lack of consistency experienced by foster youth, which negatively affects their ability to experience academic achievement commensurate with their classmates. As a significant subgroup with higher rates of changes in school and home placement, foster youth experience multiple academic ramifications resulting from their involvement with children and family services. Several of these fall into the lower tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs related to physiological and safety needs.

Students in foster care struggle to realize academic achievement at the same rate as their peers (Calix, 2009). They are at a higher risk of experiencing transitions and loss of educational progress due to their high mobility and are at a significantly greater risk for truancy, dropout, and involvement in special education (Tyre, 2012). The literature is consistent in the dire statistics for foster youth, and the importance of significant interventions to help them reach their full academic potential while simultaneously supporting their unique social-emotional needs resulting from involvement in the foster care system (Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh, 2016). School and district staff must identify ways to provide onsite support and programs for students in the foster youth system to improve their academic outcomes.

This review synthesizes the literature relevant to the educational experiences of foster youth. Chapter 2 is organized into the following major sections: (a) Foster Youth Experiences,

(b) Education Needs and Potential Outcomes, (c) Trauma Informed Interventions, (d) Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and (e) Legislation.

Foster Youth Experiences

The Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) in California defines Foster Youth as a high-need subgroup because these students are more likely to "move frequently and are typically forced to change schools at least once and sometimes as often as three times during a school year, are likely to suffer long-lasting consequences, including educational outcomes that place them far below their peers" (Humphrey & Koppich, 2015, p. 3). As a result of their involvement in the child welfare system, they face an increased risk of low academic achievement and historically the education system has not included a system to provide the necessary support and interventions to help close this gap.

Foster Youth Voices

Morton (2015) conducted a phenomenological research study of foster youth and their perceptions of how their involvement in the foster care system affected their educational experiences. The researchers relied on existing data and literature regarding graduation rates and academic trends for foster youth, then conducted a qualitative research study of eleven participants who were in the foster care system during their high school years. The key negative impacts the researchers identified were low graduation rates, lack of preparation for independent living, and higher rates of inclusion in Special Education. The main barrier to academic achievement identified was high mobility. While other factors were noted (lack of stability in familial structure, incomplete implementation of Individualized Education Plan (IEP), loss of academic progress due to multiple school placements), all can be traced back to the issue of high mobility.

The qualitative component of their research consisted of in-depth interviews with the eleven participants and the subsequent identification and isolation of 181 significant statements (i.e., those repeated multiple times by a participant). These significant statements were then categorized into themes of the foster care system, school system, and emotional factors. The study also included a brief narrative about each participant, and their experiences in the foster care and public education systems. The major conclusions support the original hypothesis that high mobility is a significant factor preventing academic achievement for foster youth. However, the participants also spoke of the emotional toll of foster care, of feeling unwanted, and how this affected their motivation and ability to successfully fulfill graduation requirements.

A mixed methods report conducted in 2015 identified the disparities in academic achievement between foster youth and their peers. However, the researchers believe that most of the existing research leaves out one important voice: that of the foster youth. To address this, they spoke with older foster youth regarding their concurrent experiences in public education and the child welfare system. The researchers found that "when given the opportunity to participate, youth show progress in being able to identify issues and view themselves as change agents" (Schroeter, et al., 2015, p. 2). The researchers utilized the Youth Education Survey (YES) which consists of 54 questions focused on "(a) teacher-student relationships, (b) peer supports for learning, and (c) future goals and expectations" (Schroeter, et al., 2015, p. 2). The data analysis allowed for deviations due to high mobility and student engagement. Through this process, they determined that the more placements a student experienced the less hopeful they were regarding their future opportunities. The key factor related by a majority of the respondents was the need for a trusted adult, often a teacher, outside the purviews of the Child Welfare System. Some of the needs identified by participants to close the existing academic achievement gap and provide

for eventual independent living options included access to co-curricular activities, financial assistance, and college application workshops.

The data utilized in this report come directly from foster youth participants. They were given the opportunity to reflectively share academic and social-emotional supports provided within the educational setting which helped them feel they had opportunities similar to those of their peers. The identified need for a trusted adult and additional support systems for tasks such as homework completion, college applications, and involvement in co and extra-curricular activities highlights a need not typically included in research studies focused primarily on the academic settings. However, these social-emotional needs are important, as a student (regardless of inclusion in a significant sub-group) engaged in the school community is more likely to stay in school and identify opportunities for their future.

Mobility and the Impact on Education

Weisman (2012) looked at the negative impact of frequent mobility during kindergarten through twelfth grade. There is a significant increase in dropout rates, inclusion in Special Education, and overall achievement gaps for a “highly mobile” student, defined in this article as six or move moves while enrolled in K-12 education. The author is especially concerned with students who move multiple times within a single school year, since "with each move, a student is set back academically an average of four to six months, due to disruption in academic advancement, broken continuity in lesson plans and curriculum, and severed social ties with peers and teachers" (Weisman, 2012, p. 2). Often, school districts within the same state, or even the same county, will have differing graduation requirements, which increases the difficulty for the highly mobile student to stay on track for graduation. The author, therefore, calls on states to establish consistent graduation requirement criteria, which would not adversely affect the highly

mobile student. The author also described a variety of situations which result in high mobility, such as military transfers, poverty, homelessness, foster youth, expulsion, change in family structure (such as divorce), migratory agricultural work, and juvenile arrest. There are some children who also see upward mobility when their parent(s) obtain a higher paying job; however, in these situations, the negative educational effects are frequently countered by positive family impacts. While there is legislation at both the federal and state level, students experiencing high mobility often struggle academically and face a much higher likelihood of not completing high school. Although this report focuses on highly mobile students from a variety of backgrounds, it is grounded in data and analysis of academic achievement trends throughout K-12. The middle section of the report focuses on suggestions to support highly mobile youth, in order to keep them on track for high school graduation. The researchers provide an analysis of potential concerns regarding these suggestions. The author ultimately reminds the audience that restrictions such as funding and inter-district collaboration must be resolved to support all students, but especially those at-risk due to any factor, or a combination of factors.

Frerer (2014) focused on foster youth in two California counties from 2003 through 2006 for a mixed methods dissertation. She utilized attendance trends and California Standards Test (CST) scores in English-language arts and math to study youth recently removed from their family homes and placed in foster care in comparison with non-foster youth peers to determine potential outcomes for students within the child welfare system. She found significant discrepancies between the two subgroups, indicating that children within foster care fare worse than their classmates. Frerer (2014) is careful to clarify foster youth are not a homogeneous group; therefore, it is also important to look at the subgroups within the child welfare system, as there are variances within the academic potential of these subgroups as well. Frerer (2014)

concluded that "lower performing trajectory groups are defined by an increased number of education risks present at entry and residential and school changes in the first year of placement" (p. 65). Generally speaking, while foster youth are at higher risk of low academic performance, this can be mitigated by stability in their placement. Frerer (2014) utilizes case studies and anecdotal evidence in addition to statistics and demographic data. Specifically, for the analysis of CST scores, Frerer analyzed foster youth as a subgroup compared with both the general population of students and other low-performing subgroups. Frerer also recognized the time-limited scope of her research and suggested that further longitudinal studies will be crucial to truly understanding the long-term impacts of high mobility on the academic achievement of foster youth.

Impacts Based on Type of Placement

McCrae, Lee, Barth, and Rauktis (2010) looked at two placement options for youth in foster care: non-kinship foster care (FC) and group home care (GC). The researchers explained that "this study assesses academic, cognitive, and behavior changes over three years among youth whose first placement after child welfare referral was GC or nonkinship FC" (McCrae, Lee, Barth, & Rauktis, 2010, p. 231). They relied on data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) that followed youth from referral to placement nationwide. Youth, social workers, and caregivers were interviewed to determine developmental or health (physical and emotional) changes in the time following a referral to the child welfare system. These youth typically present with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety and receive some level of Mental Health Services as a result of their placement. For the purpose of this study, children were evaluated at the time of placement, and then at 18 and 36 months post-placement. Children also participated in academic and cognitive function

assessments. Their resulting research identified little difference in behavior, mental health, or academic progress for children placed in non-kinship foster care or group home care. This contradicted existing research that indicates that the familial environment of non-kinship foster care is preferable and more beneficial than group home care (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994). The researchers also acknowledged that the child welfare system often houses children with predetermined behavioral challenges in group home care as a first placement. The researchers relied on several data collection formats ranging from interviews, standardized assessments of academic achievement and cognitive ability, mental health services, and behavioral referrals. This allowed for multiple measures and analysis of data. While the sample size was limited, it was heterogeneous regarding ethnicity, state of origin, gender, age, and socioeconomic status. While not a focus of the study, the researchers also noted indications that African-American males tend to fare worse in care and suffer greater academic deficiency than their peers.

The experiences of foster youth significantly differ from those of their peers, and consideration of these differences demonstrates the importance of interventions and strategies to support these students in their academic pursuits. The challenges and obstacles created by involvement with the foster care system create barriers to academic achievement that must be addressed collaboratively by the educational and child welfare agencies.

Educational Needs and Potential Outcomes

Foster youth face unique challenges and suffer from lower academic achievement and post-secondary outcomes than their peers. The literature is consistent about these discrepancies and the need for further interventions to support this specific category of at-risk youth.

Academic Achievement

Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) focus on the unique needs and challenges of foster youth in the educational system. Legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), passed in 2002, and Blueprint for Reform (2010) set expectations for student achievement, but left out guidelines to support the vulnerable subgroup of youth within the child welfare system. These students "are at an elevated risk for a number of negative educational outcomes: low graduation rates, special education enrollment, grade retention, social behavioral problems, poor academic performance, behavioral health challenges and social mobility" (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2012, p. 83). As these challenges significantly impede learning, they must be addressed if foster youth are to make gains similar to their peers. The statistics are concerning; foster youth are 20% less likely to graduate high school, and 60% less likely to pursue post-secondary education. They also struggle from maltreatment resulting from the neglect and/or abuse that led to their removal from their home of origin. Additionally, many children within the foster care system suffered from prenatal exposure to drugs and/or alcohol, which can have devastating long-term effects.

Hahnel and Van Zile (2012) researched the potential academic outcomes of foster youth, and reported dismal predictions: "As many as 75% of foster youth perform below grade level; 50-80% have been retained at least one year in school; and more than 50% of foster children do not graduate from high school" (p. 443). Of primary concern is the ability for foster youth to potentially exit the cycle of abuse and maltreatment, and adequately prepare for a successful, meaningful, and independent life. Without the benefit of education, the authors expressed their concern that youth are destined to experience difficulty and necessitate assistance well past their exit from foster care. Specifically, "not only will many foster youth fail to flourish and fail to

contribute to the economy, but many will also lean on the government for public assistance or accrue costs through incarceration" (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012, p. 444). While acknowledging that children sometimes must be removed from their homes to ensure their safety, the experiences leading to this removal and the subsequent disruptions in placement and schools further challenges foster youths' abilities to realize academic success. Unfortunately, "our government and society have taken responsibility for these children, and we are quietly, yet completely, failing to meet their educational needs" (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012, p. 437). This predicament has potential remedies through increased advocacy and inter-agency collaboration, but these rely on clearly-worded legislation to allow these processes to develop and benefit foster youth.

Impact from Mobility

Baron (2013) wrote about the lack of academic progress experienced by foster youth each time they change schools, which happens far more frequently than for students not in foster care. Building upon research from the California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership (2011), Baron (2013) shared the concerning statistics that each move a child makes results in a loss of approximately six months of educational exposure and increases the risk of students not graduating. She also cited research from UC Berkeley which found that "about 95 percent of foster youth changed schools the first year they were placed in care compared to 37 percent to 38 percent of students in a comparison group" (Baron, 2013, p.1). This puts these students at a significant disadvantage for potential academic success, especially when compared to their classmates. Furthermore, Baron (2013) pointed out the challenges inherent in the lives of foster youth, specifically the neglect and trauma that resulted in their removal from their family of origin, indicates a poor prognosis for success in school, which is then further complicated by the

challenges incumbent on inclusion in the foster care system. The researcher suggested increased collaboration between state systems and enhanced linkage of database systems to allow all stakeholders improved access to crucial information necessary to support these at-risk youth.

Special Education

According to Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012), foster youth are more likely to be enrolled in Special Education programs, with inconsistent implementation of their Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) due to frequent school changes. They also suffer from a lack of stability outside of school, with most foster youth moving multiple times during their educational years. With each move causing a child to fall further behind, these children are retained at a higher rate than their peers. The researchers recommended that child welfare agencies and local schools partner to support foster youths.

Inter-Agency Supports

Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) also stated that an understanding of federal and state legislation related to school of origin and priority enrollment is essential in minimizing the changes that students experience, and expediting the transition to a new school when such a change is unavoidable. Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) recommended school social workers who are available at school sites for foster youth to access when the need arises. The researchers clarified the different agency resources that should be available to foster youth within both the educational and child welfare systems to address the myriad of needs that these children have.

A 2010 study by Zetlin, Weinberg, and Shea (2010) focused on educational needs of foster youth and ways to improve their academic achievement and social emotional opportunities. The article begins with the dire statistics of youth in foster care. Their prospects

upon aging out of the system often include incarceration and homelessness. While in school, they have higher rates of truancy, disciplinary action, dropouts, and identification as Special Education. Foster youth often perform below grade level and exhibit inappropriate or dangerous behavior. The researchers cautioned against assigning blame, instead advocating that "The CW [child welfare] agency, the school, the family members, and the youths themselves must all work together strategically in new ways and with great energy to accelerate, expand, and unify efforts to achieve better results" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Stein, 2010, p. 246).

For this study, the researchers formed four focus groups, each with distinct sets of stakeholders, to openly discuss the struggles faced by foster youth and propose strategies to overcome these obstacles. The focus groups consisted of kinship caregivers, foster parents, school district staff, and educational liaisons. The questions asked were specific to their roles in the children's lives. The results of these discussions were analyzed, and coding schemes decided upon to identify recurring themes. The caregivers (both kinship and foster) overwhelmingly shared that they felt the schools were unresponsive to the specific traumas experienced by children in foster care. Specifically, they felt that school employees such as teachers, school psychologists, and administrators were unfamiliar with the impact of prenatal exposure to drugs and alcohol, neglect, and abuse.

The caregivers shared that resources and interventions necessary for foster youth differ from those needed by non-impacted students, and they felt this differentiation did not occur. The school district staff expressed concern regarding the high mobility of foster youth, and how this impacts their educational continuity. Students who frequently change schools are at a greater risk of retention and lower academic performance. School staff also felt that communication from the Child Welfare Agency needed to improve to allow school employees access to pertinent

information regarding children in their schools. They spoke of unreturned calls and emails, and dismissive conversations when they did reach a social worker, which impacted the ability to develop trust between the agencies.

The educational liaisons primary concern was a lack of understanding regarding their role. They felt the expectations had not been fully explained to them, and neither the school nor the Child Welfare Agency seems willing to accept them as part of the educational team. However, "all three sets of participants recognized that students in foster care experience serious academic, social, and behavioral problems in the school setting and that much more needs to be done to address these considerable challenges" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Stein, 2010, p. 252). Each group felt they were frequently operating in crisis mode, and that the other groups were not doing their part to help ease the situation.

The obvious limitation of this study is the sample size. The participants were selected from two different counties in California, but each group contained under twenty members. Another concern is the lack of recommendations from the authors. Each focus group provided concluding thoughts and suggestions to increase the partnership among the stakeholders, but these were in isolation and each group pointed blame at the others. However, the information they gathered was valuable and meaningful, as it provides insight into the struggles experienced by key personnel helping foster youth find academic and personal success.

The report from the California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership (2011) further highlighted the concerning statistics regarding students in foster care. Specifically, this report demonstrated that young children in the child welfare system often do not receive early childhood educational services and those in elementary school already show deficits compared to their peers. Once students reach middle and high school, the disparity widens to an almost

insurmountable gap in achievement. However, the researchers have found programs that ameliorate some of these obstacles to academic success. Educational advocates who work individually with foster youth have seen significant increases, as has collaboration among the various support members such as foster parents, school representatives, agency specialists, and therapeutic care providers. This report also detailed research regarding the importance of community partnerships to allow foster youth opportunities to learn real world skills and work side-by-side with industry professionals. This provided increased self-confidence and self-sufficiency, which is significant since research shows that "no matter the age children are when they come into foster care, we know that their life circumstances have made them academically vulnerable. How we address their educational needs will have lifelong impact" (California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, 2011, p. 7). While foster youth face inherent challenges in making academic strides commensurate with their peers, there are programs that will help support their efforts and these must be implemented consistently and with fidelity.

Interventions for Foster Youth

Lustig's (2008) dissertation focused on the low-performance academic realities for students in the foster care system, and Education Code legislation that created accountability for helping low-performing subgroups. Specifically, Lustig (2008) studied foster youth who received three distinct tutoring interventions to determine types of supports and their impact on this subgroup. Students were enrolled in one of three different tutoring programs and tested both before beginning and after concluding the tutoring program. The researcher utilized the Wide Range Achievement Test IV (WRAT IV) for this testing. She shared a null hypothesis that inclusion in tutoring programs would not have a significant impact on academic achievement. While inclusion in each of the tutoring programs resulted in statistically significant academic

increases for foster youth, the program which utilized one-on-one tutoring, as opposed to group, clearly demonstrated the most significant increase. The researcher concluded that targeted and personalized intervention is, statistically, the most effective.

The researcher relied primarily on statistical data, both compiled by others and by herself throughout this research study. There were clear problems with the study. First, the researcher originally intended for there to be three groups of fifty students each. However, the reality was that one group had forty-four students, one had thirty-eight students, and one had only nine students. Additionally, only 60% of the student who participated in the pre-test were still involved in the program by the administration of the post-test. There was also a major fire in the region during the study, which resulted in mass evacuations and the closure of schools. Each of these factors has the potential to skew the results of the study.

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sufficiency. "No matter the age children are when they come into foster care, we know that their life circumstances have made them academically vulnerable. How we address their educational needs will have lifelong impact" (California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership, 2011, p. 7). While foster youth face inherent challenges in making academic strides commensurate with their peers, there are programs that will help support their efforts and these must be implemented consistently and with fidelity.

Effects of Maltreatment on Education

Youth experiencing maltreatment risk incompletion of basic educational goals, such as high school graduation, and the likelihood of post-secondary education lags far behind that of their peers. Barker, Kerr, Dong, Wood, and DeBeck (2017) conducted a study of youth in Vancouver, Canada, who had experienced maltreatment, their current educational status, and their future goals. The researches focused on five categories of maltreatment: physical, emotional, and sexual abuse, and physical and emotional neglect. The researchers worked directly with youth to determine the type of extent of maltreatment they had experienced and their educational status. Through data analysis, it was noted that "four of the five maltreatment categories were positively and moderately to strongly correlated with one another. It should be noted that while sexual abuse was also positively correlated, it was the most weakly associated of all variables" (Barker, Kerr, Don, Wood, & DeBeck, 2017, p. 380). Understanding the correlation between experiences of maltreatment and likelihood of high school graduation is an essential step in identifying trauma-informed interventions to support increased academic achievement for foster youth. The finding that "distinct forms of childhood maltreatment have a deleterious impact on educational attainment demonstrate a critical need for trauma-informed interventions to support vulnerable young people" (Barker, Kerr, Don, Wood, & DeBeck, 2017,

p. 382). These interventions include providing a physically and emotionally safe environment for students, the development of trust, and stable connections with adult role models. This research clearly indicated the need for unique and specific interventions to support foster youth who have experienced any form of trauma and/or maltreatment.

Calix (2009) studied the effects of experience in foster care by analyzing student assessment and child welfare data for cohorts of students in North Carolina. Not surprisingly, foster youth fared worse than their typical peers due to involvement with foster care but also factors which may co-occur such as poverty, parental welfare, family structure, parent educational level, parental involvement, and ethnicity (Calix, 2009). The reasons that led a youth into the child welfare system, involving experiences with maltreatment, neglect, and abuse also negatively affect a child's readiness for academic success. Calix (2009) found "that characteristics and variations based on the foster care experience such as race, reason for placement, age at entry, length of time in foster care, and number of foster care placement settings, are related to low educational achievement" (p. iii).

For this study, Calix (2009) utilized data from four year cohorts of students who took the End of Course Algebra I (EOC) test, a mandatory assessment in the state of North Carolina. This data included all students. Calix (2009) then cross-referenced the assessment data with longitudinal data from the Child Welfare Data Experiences which tracks children newly involved with foster care. Calix (2009) also disaggregated the data into subsets to reflect factors such as gender, length of time in care, and age of entry into care. The results were unsurprising and consistent with other research. Each year, non-foster youth scored at least five points higher (with 55 as a threshold for meeting the standard) than students in foster care. The results of the study also showed that the later a child enters foster care, the less likely he is to realize success

on the EOC (Calix, 2009). In addition, white children in care scored higher than other ethnic groups, to which Calix (2009) advised that "child welfare workers should focus more attention to the educational needs of minority groups in foster care" (p. 138). However, Calix (2009) cautioned that enhanced interventions need to be approached in a culturally sensitive and responsive manner.

Calix (2009) also proposed social services utilize all available resources to support children in care, and minimize disruption of placements. A final suggestion addresses the need for increased communication between child welfare agencies and educational systems. This study focused significantly on quantitative data to demonstrate the achievement gaps between foster youth and their peers, and provided recommendations to increase the levels of support to help foster youth realize academic success similar to that of their peers.

Trauma Informed Interventions

The idea of trauma informed interventions is relatively new on the educational landscape. Research has begun on the effectiveness of these interventions, and the results are promising, but thus far quite limited. Trauma Informed Interventions most frequently focus on experienced trauma, mentoring, and social-emotional learning.

One of the concerns regarding staff implementation of trauma informed interventions with impacted youth is the lack of understanding of the many ways trauma may manifest itself in individuals, and how these reactions may affect the ability to fully participate in therapeutic social emotional interventions. For example, those who have experienced trauma are like to have "difficulties with trust and problems of emotion regulation" (Cook & Newman, 2014, p. 301). Thus, the New Haven Trauma Competency Group held a consensus convention to identify best practices in working with survivors of trauma. This group identified five primary

competencies necessary in successfully supporting trauma victims: scientific knowledge about trauma, Psychosocial trauma-focused assessment, trauma-informed psychosocial intervention, trauma-informed professionalism, and trauma-informed systems. Each of these focus on an aspect of trauma and the importance of understanding the experiences of the victim if there is to be any hope of offering appropriate supports and interventions. The scientific knowledge focused specifically on existing research and the history of the trauma experienced, because "the importance of tailoring trauma-focused knowledge and practice to integrate individual differences, cultural identity, and developmental issues is essential, as these concerns interact with trauma responses and recovery" (Cook & Newman, 2014, p. 302). Psychosocial trauma-focused assessment encourages the trusted adult to ask about trauma, as victims are often unwilling to freely share their experiences. The listener must also look for a history or pattern of trauma, as students in the foster care system have likely experienced multiple instances of trauma which have led them to their current state of social-emotional distress and insecurity.

Trauma-focused psychosocial intervention speaks to the importance of implementing "engagement and therapeutic strategies that do not support client avoidance, but foster a sense of safety, trust, and openness to address trauma-focused material" (Cook & Newman, 2014, p. 304). The competency of trauma-informed professionalism speaks to the importance of setting clear and consistent boundaries with the student, and listening with compassion and respect but maintaining enough emotional distance to prevent associated trauma to the supportive adult. The final competency identified by the New Haven Trauma Competency Group relates to Trauma-informed relational and systems, which specifies a "focus on recognizing the disorganizing effects of trauma at the individual and systems levels, and utilizing knowledge, relational skills, and consultation skills to effectively address and transcend such barriers in order to foster

recovery and resiliency, preparedness, and intervention" (Cook & Newman, 2014, p. 305). The impact of this study directs care providers, whether at the lay or professional level, guidance on the importance of seeing trauma through a variety of lenses while setting sufficient boundaries to avoid secondary trauma of either the victim or the supporter. These ideas must be included in the training components to assist staff in their ability to adequately support foster youth.

Response to Interventions

Response to Intervention (RTI) plans focus on systemic processes to identify at-risk students and provide timely interventions along a continuum of tiered services (Kentucky Department of Education, 2008). The tiers within this type of system typically fall under the broad category of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), and breakdown into three clearly identifiable systems of intervention. As student needs increase, interventions move up the tiered pyramid (see Figure 2) for increased individualized support to ensure their successful access to the curriculum. A crucial component of RTI models is a reliance of objective data points. Educators frequently use formative and summative assessments as well as discipline and/or behavior referrals to identify students in need of additional supports.

Tier 1 supports are available and applied as needed to all students within the educational environment. These may include classroom supports such as test preparation or retakes, additional resources to support specific learning needs, and/or manipulatives to enhance understanding of abstract concepts. Also within the first Tier, "all students are screened periodically during the school year to identify those who need instructional and behavioral support through interventions" (Kentucky Department of Education, 2008). When implemented with fidelity, Tier 1 Universal Supports are sufficient for the majority of the student population, with statistics showing success in the 80% - 90% range (Positive Behavioral Interventions and

Supports, 2019). For behavioral needs, Tier 1 supports often rely on whole-school identified needs, and can include lessons on social-emotional learning on topics such as conflict resolution and positive interactions with peers (Belser, Shillingford, & Joe, 2016).

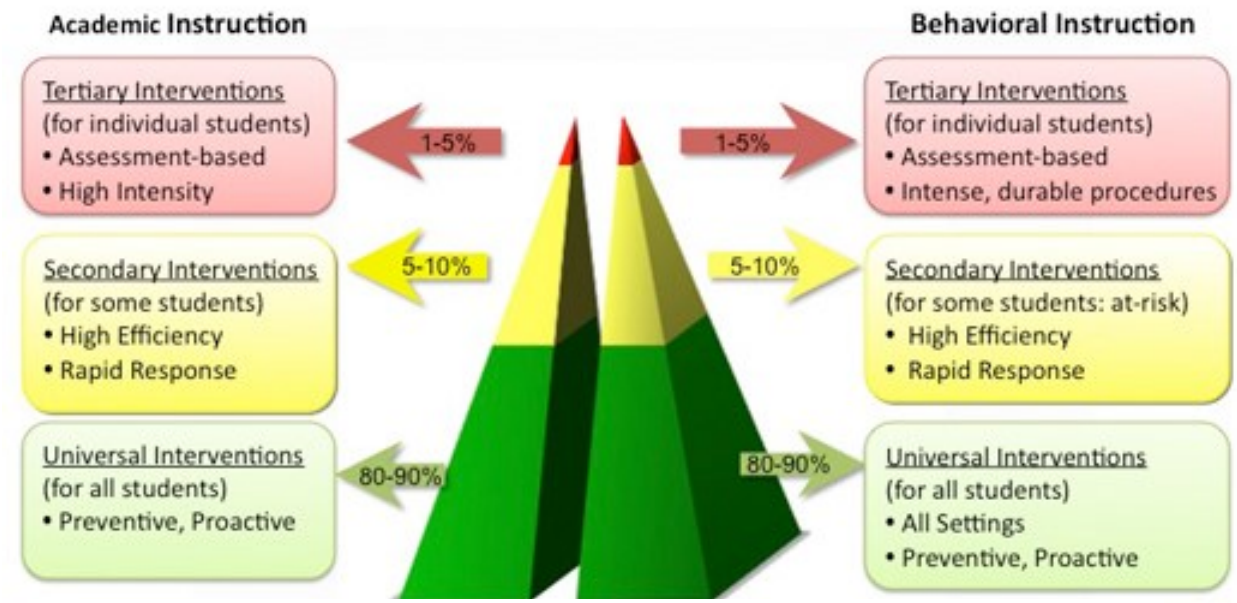

Figure 2. Designing Schoolwide Systems for Student Success
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports. (2019). Designing Schoolwide Systems for Student Success. Retrieved from https://www.pbis.org/school/mtss

Through the ongoing screen process, students who struggle at the Tier 1 level begin to receive more targeted interventions, often within a small group or individual setting. "Unlike Tier 1 supports, Tier 2 interventions should not be one-size-fits-all, but driven by the needs of each individual student" (Belser, et al., 2016, p. 257). There may be cases where several students with a similar need in which case small group instruction or counseling may be appropriate. However, educators must be cautious to ensure they prioritize individual student need over the benefits of convenience, and with this utilize one-on-one interventions when appropriate. "Students in Tier 2 receive increasing intensive academic and/or behavior instruction matched to their needs, based on results of continuous progress monitoring" (Kentucky Department of Education, 2008). This level of intervention is typically implemented

for approximately 15% of students; once the students have demonstrated the ability to perform at grade level in the area of need, they may drop back to Tier 1 or remain in Tier 2 depending on the system of intervention and the demonstrated needs (Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, 2019).

For a small number of students (typically defined as 5%), Tier 1 and 2 interventions do not provide adequate support to meet their learning needs in academic and/or behavioral categories. When this happens, the student moves to the highest section of the pyramid, the Tier 3 supports. At this level, "the interventions are more intensive to target the student's academic or behavioral skill deficits for remediation of existing problems" (Kentucky Department of Education, 2008). Also at this stage, outside resources for specific interventions may be appropriate, depending on the student's unique needs (Besler, et al., 2016). Data continues to play a major role in progress monitoring, with frequent assessments and data check points utilized to determine if the implemented interventions are having the anticipated effect on academic progress.

Tiers 2 and 3 often come into play with foster youth, as they have specific social and emotional needs that may negatively affect their ability to access the core curriculum within the classroom. Benner, Kutash, Nelson, and Fisher (2013) state that "that youth with or at-risk for emotional and behavioral disorders have severe deficits in their academic functioning. To begin to address these deficits, we focus on the need to close the opportunity gap by providing access to multi-tiered systems of academic prevention, maximizing academic learning time, and providing explicit instruction" (p. 15). While foster youth may not have diagnoses of emotional and/or behavioral disorders, their traumatic background overlap with the needs of students these disabilities. Specifically, foster youth struggle to feel in control of their emotions in order to

successfully access their curriculum (Calix, 2009). With this in mind, Benner, et al. (2013) recommend a structured classroom structure where both behavioral and academic expectations are explicitly taught and consistently reinforced. This includes clearly explaining the curricular objectives, holding students accountable for their behavior and learning, and following a predictable routine each day to enable students to trust the structure of the classroom. While these fall under the larger umbrella of Tier 1 universal supports, educators may consider utilizing these strategies within small groups or with individual students to support the Tier 2 and 3 interventions as warranted based on demonstrated student need.

Trauma Focused Therapy

Youth in the foster care system have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACE) to some degree, as the experience of being removed from a home and family of origin is a specific trauma in itself. The events leading up to the removal are another set of ACE. While significant research exists to focus on the need for early intervention on children facing these struggles, there is far less on the impact on adolescents and the experiences they have encountered which require specific forms of social-emotional support. "Adolescence represents a key window of opportunity to ameliorate the short- and longer-term impacts of trauma and positively alter the life course trajectory" (Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis, 2017, p. 110). Students experiencing multiple ACE are at far greater risk of lack of academic motivation, increased disciplinary interactions, and grade retention (Soleimanpour, et al., 2017).

A study from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) conducted in 1998 demonstrates the long-term health and risk behavior concerns for children who experience ACE (see Figure 3). The likelihood of foster youth, who have multiple ACEs in their background, are at increased risk for several components which may lead to early death, the first and most prevalent of which

is social, emotional, and cognitive impairment. Intervening at this level is of urgent concern when considering the negative outcomes should a child continue up the pyramid.

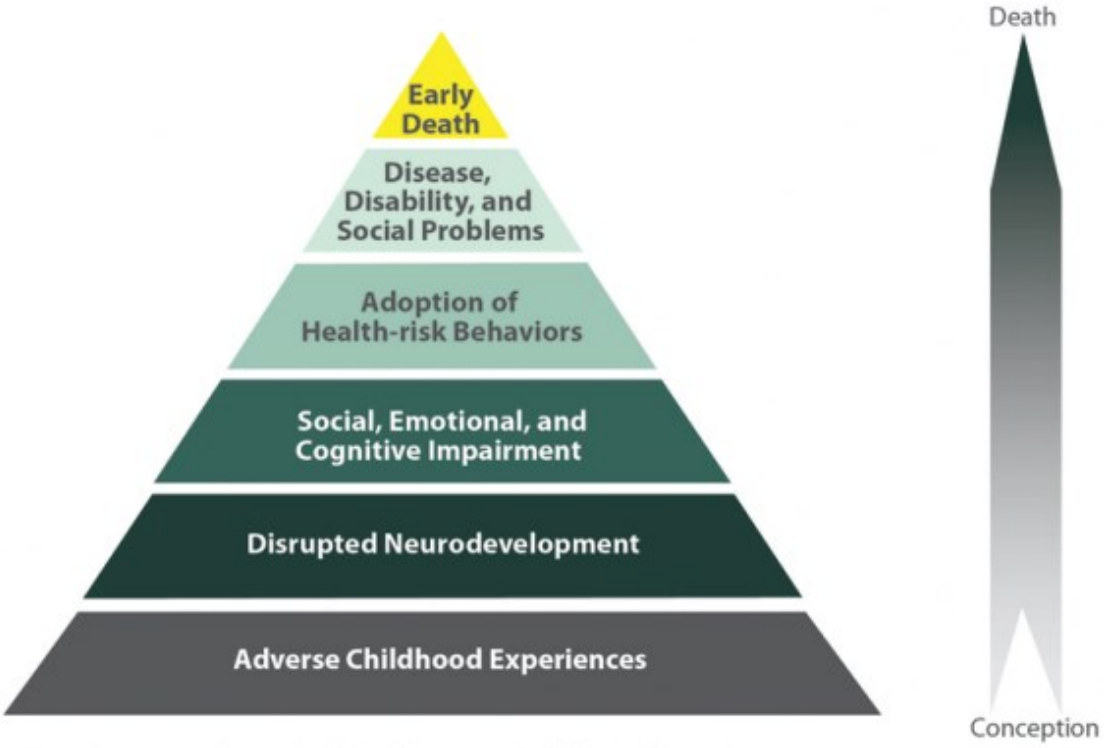

Figure 3. Risk factors resulting from adverse childhood experiences. CDC, 2016

Thus, trauma informed interventions that specifically address ACE prove necessary if foster youth are to receive educational opportunities similar to their non-traumatized peers. Soleimanpour, et al. (2017) introduced Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy which "uses individual and group cognitive-behavioral therapy to address the multiple domains of trauma and to teach youth skills in how to regulate their behavior, process their trauma, and improve their sense of safety and trust" (p. 111). This is a higher level of therapeutic intervention than is likely possible within a school site with lay staff, but the ideas presented provide a foundation for creating programs aimed at supporting the unique needs created by ACE.

Trauma Informed Practices

With a specific interest in preparing new educators to support students who have experienced ACE, RB-Banks and Meyer (2017) invited students in a credential program to discuss the negative behaviors they have witnessed in student teaching and engage in a round table discussion as to what types of trauma may be motivating this negative behavior. RB-Banks and Meyer (2017) believe that providing therapeutic training for classroom teachers is crucial:."The relevance of Trauma Informed Practices (TIPs) in the classroom to build resiliency in students facing trauma is essential in the design of an effective educational platform" (p. 66). The researchers focused on identifying the underlying causes for negative behavior within the classroom and working with the student to resolve those social-emotional needs, rather than labeling a child as problematic and accepting their misbehavior as a personality flaw. The misconception that poor choices in the classroom are inherent in the child's physical and social-emotional makeup, is one of the primary factors which leads to over-identification for special education, specifically under the eligibility criteria of Emotional Disturbance. (RB-Banks & Meyer, 2017). By working with teacher candidates who are beginning to understand their craft and embark on a career which will touch the lives of many children, the researchers aim to shift the paradigm of classroom management from punitive to therapeutic.

Trauma Informed Care

While there is recognition of experienced trauma for youth in foster care, a gap remains in the training of staff charged with the care of these children. Thus, recent research has focused on the importance of trauma-informed care (TIC), "a term describing an international trend in mental health care whereby treatment approaches and cultures recognize the pervasive impact of trauma and aim to ameliorate, rather than exacerbate, the effects of trauma" (Brown, Baker, &

Wilcox, 2011, p. 507). The authors point out a dearth in systemic interventions to address trauma for children involved with child welfare services, over 97% of whom have experienced trauma (Brown, Baker, & Wilcox, 2011). Several states have begun to implement training curricula to address the need for interventions focus on experienced trauma, although none have fully integrated these therapeutic interventions into a systemized instructional platform. (Brown, Baker, & Wilcox, 2011). However, a lawsuit out of Maine prompted collaboration with the Sidran Institute, the Trauma, Research, Education and Training Institute, and other interested stakeholders to develop the Risking Connections (RC) training model that aims to integrate TIC with existing attachment and social learning theories. The researchers propose that this type of system-wide program is necessary to effectively intervene with children who have experienced moderate to severe trauma. A primary focus placed on coping strategies in stressful situations enables the individual to recognize their escalation and adapt accordingly. After conducting research on various implementations of an RC curriculum, the researchers determined that "the RC training impacted trainees at the three levels of knowledge, beliefs, and behavior" (Brown, Baker, & Wilcox, 2011, p. 511). These changes provide a foundation for increased RC inspired training to provide staff and caregivers with resources to address children impacted by trauma.

Responsive Classroom

Anyon, Nicotera, and Veeh (2016) conducted a mixed methods study on a full-school implementation of RC. They focused on a single site that serves grades K-8 and used RC specific quantitative measures of surveys and the Classroom Practices Observation Measures (CPON) and qualitative measure of focus groups across a range of stakeholders. Based on their previous research, they determined that three things must be present for a whole-school intervention to be successful: leadership and teacher buy-in, ongoing training and support, and

the ability to successfully manipulate the intervention to meet the specific needs of the school. The participants spanned the ranged of teachers in grades K-8, administrators from K-5, 6th -8th grades, and K-8, and school social work interns, with a mix of male and female. The study mentioned significant diversity in the student population, but this did not appear to be reflected in the staff participants.

The results of the study varied significantly between the K-5 participants and the 6th -8th grade participants. This appears to reflect two primary differences in the groups: leadership buy-in and the ability and willingness to fully implement RC with fidelity. The K-5 principal was reported to support the RC interventions while the 6th-8th grades principal was viewed as perceiving RC as additional tasks, unrelated to the overall educational process (Anyon, Nicotera, & Veeh, 2016). These attitudes were reflected in the teacher implementation in that K-5 teachers actively worked to utilize the components of RC with fidelity. These included morning meetings with the class that facilitated stronger relationships between teachers and students, logical consequences for infractions, and shared decision making. At the 6th-8th grade levels, teachers felt they were unable to implement the core supports such as morning meetings, because it would need to be done at the expense of academics such as literacy and mathematics, both of which were areas of focus for their site. In addition, teachers of the higher grades felt that the logical consequences and lack of punitive measures stymied their ability to respond to more significant behavioral challenges within their classrooms.

When used with fidelity, RC provides a classroom management structure with built-in interventions to respond to student needs within the classroom environment and to provide consistency for all students. However, one of the tenets of RC is the flexibility to adapt to the needs of the school site and this was missing in the implementation in the 6-8 classrooms as

teachers viewed RC as infringing upon their academic and content needs. When looking at whole class interventions, stakeholders must see the value as a support to meeting curricular needs, instead of a roadblock.

Mentorship Programs

Scannapieco and Painter (2013) studied the impact of a mentoring program targeted at teenage foster youth who were not in a permanent placement and were likely to age out of the foster care system without familial support. The state of Texas mandated the creation of this program to compensate for the disadvantages faced by teens who aged out upon turning 18 years old. The study focused on 45 youths (out of 200 referred) who were paired "with mentors for the support and guidance which comes from the positive youth development instilled through one-to-one mentoring relationships" (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013, p. 166). The teens and mentors met, on average, for one hour a week with partnerships lasting up to two years. The foster youths and mentors were asked to complete confidential surveys regarding their relationships. When the response to an email link sent by the state of Texas yielded limited responses, subsequent phone calls and the addition of a financial incentive ($25 gift card) significantly increased the rate of reply. However, the results still fell shy of the 45 initially studied. One of the main limitations of contacting the youth participants was the high rate of mobility typical of the group; of the original 45 in the study, the researchers only had current contact information for 28. Of these, they successfully contacted only ten for the final surveys. Of the original mentors, 27 completed surveys. All of the youth involved in the mentoring program had been in foster care for a statistically significant time (defined as five or more years) and had experienced an average of six different placements. The periodic surveys reflected positive interactions and experiences, but the small sample size of respondents should be noted. The mobility of the participants limited the

study and created a dearth of pre and post data. "Although there were problems with implementations of this foster youth mentoring pilot, responses on the foster youth survey suggest that those who did participate had positive experiences" (Scannapieco & Painter, 2013, p. 178).

This study faced significant obstacles in both the availability and stability of participants. Ironically, these are the same reasons the youths were identified as needing mentors as a constant presence in their otherwise volatile lives. Of further concern is the training and preparation of the mentors to successfully counsel and work with the youth to whom they were assigned. Many of the mentors who did not complete their relationship cited reasons such as behavioral challenges, threatening language, challenging schedules, and reluctance from their assigned youth. These are all typical characteristics of foster youth, especially considering their time in care (greater than five years) and number of placements (average of six, maximum of 22). While mentors reported swift response time from the Child Welfare Agency when they requested assistance, it appears one flaw in implementing this program was a lack of education for the mentors on the relationship dynamics and challenges they were likely to encounter.

Educational Success Program

The Educational Success Program (ESP) in Seattle embeds a mentoring program into four middle schools which serve a higher than average population of foster youth. Tyre (2012) studied the implementation of this mentoring program and builds on the previous research detailing the academic achievement gaps that exist for students in foster care. Tyre (2012) agrees that "although there is substantial evidence that youths in foster care fall further behind than their peers academically as they progress through school, intervening on their behalf is a challenge" (p. 231). While acknowledging the fact that foster youth suffer from high mobility and are at a significantly greater risk for truancy, dropout, and involvement in special education,

Tyre (2012) focused on a mentoring model to provide targeted support to ameliorate some of these identified deficiencies. The involvement of a stable mentor allowed for consistency in the life of the child, which is often a missing component due to frequent placement changes. To determine the needs within ESP, a variety of data were collected, "in addition to curriculum based measures (CBMs), grade point averages (GPAs), class standing, attendance, school disciplinary actions, and home/school transitions are regularly monitored" (Tyre, 2012, p. 233). This multi-tiered approach to data analysis allowed the mentor to intervene on a variety of fronts should the need arise. Since the ESP included on-site mentors and tutors, the students within the study were not intentionally selected but were already involved in the existing program. The use of multiple data points provided credibility to the study, and the inclusion of academic achievement tests, given throughout the course of the year, allowed for the clear demonstration of growth in the areas of reading fluency and reading comprehension. The study did not interrupt the current methodology of the program; rather it analyzed the effectiveness of what was already happening.

Social-Emotional Concerns

Williams (2011) described mentoring programs as an opportunity "to ensure that youth can establish and maintain healthy relationships and that they are able to express feelings and emotions and develop healthy self-esteem" (p. 63). Since foster youth often have challenging histories, the attention to and development of age appropriate social skills matters and requires explicit guidance. Williams' (2011) report further explores the increased mental health needs experienced by children in care. Decreased self-esteem often manifests in youth who frequently change placements and this issue may result in an elevated risk for depression. Per Bowlby's (2007) diagram (see Figure 4), the relationships children have with primary caregivers

significantly impact their own reflection of self. Child who experience positive relationships are more likely to exhibit healthy self-images. For most children in care, they have experienced rejection, neglect, and trauma, which result in a self-image that presents as avoiding and rejecting new relationships. Without experience of positive acceptance from primary caregivers, children exhibit self-blame and fear of meaningful relationships. Furthermore, histories that include abuse and drug exposure further increase the likelihood of mental health disorders. Williams (2011) reviewed several studies that focused on direct social skills training and mentorship, and developed recommendations for interventions to increase support for foster youth. These suggestions included further research on the implementation and effectiveness of mentorship programs and social skills training, a focus on long-term outcomes for foster youth, and an increased use of data to measure effectiveness of interventions. These interventions are designed to reverse the trend demonstrated by Bowlby (2007). Williams (2011) also expressed his opinion that a paradigm shift must occur which moves the focus to "what happens after placement, within the life of youth who have been in foster care, has to become a central and important part of the planning process, which should start at the point of admission" (p. 67). This emphasis on potential outcomes will inform the immediate decisions and provide a clear direction for the foster youth to follow. Too often, these children do not understand their present, let alone their future, and those in charge of their lives must factor in the importance of long-term security and success.

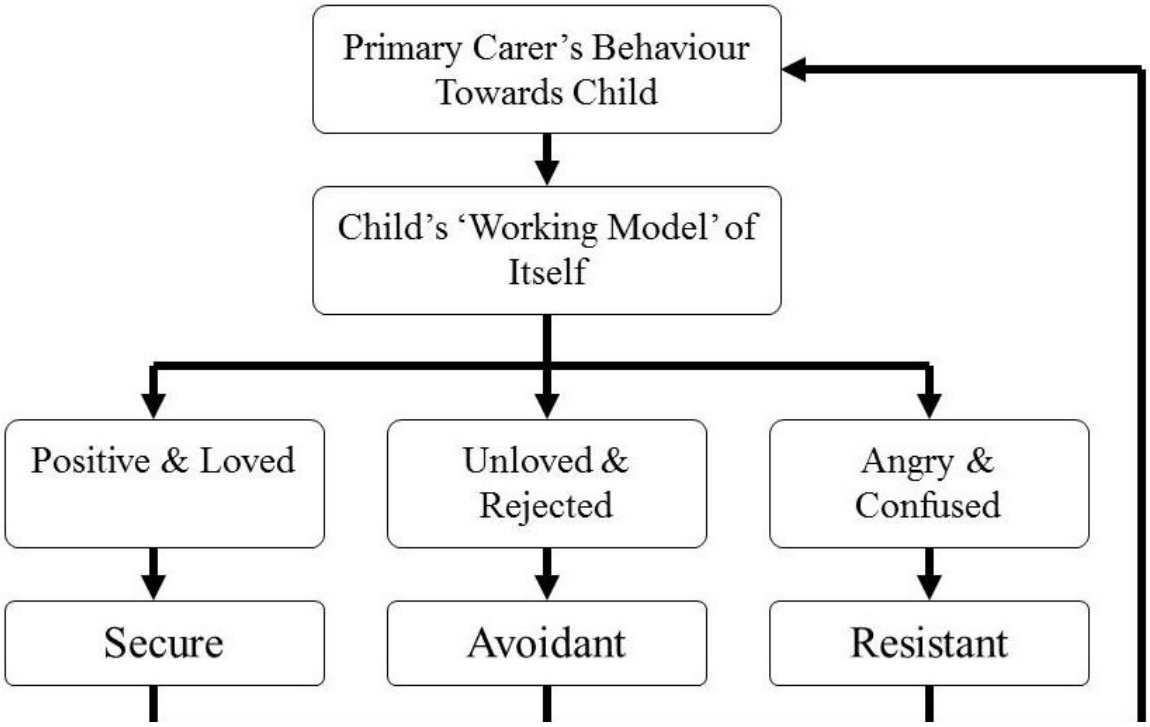

Figure 4. Bowlby's model of self-perception of traumatized youth
McLeod, S. (2007). Bowlby's attachment theory. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html

A mixed methods study completed by Osterling and Hines (2006) focused specifically on mentorship as an intervention for foster youth by evaluating the "Advocates to Successful Transition to Independence (ASTI) programme, developed and implemented by a county-based, non-profit agency that trains and supervises community volunteers to provide one-to-one advocacy and mentoring services to children in the Juvenile Court's dependency system" (p. 242). In this study of 52 participants, quantitative data was compiled on 18 characteristics and focus groups and interviews formed the qualitative data. The researchers focused on mentorship programs and their effectiveness because "a consistent finding in the literature is that many resilient children have some type of caring and supportive non-parental adult or adults in their lives" (Osterling & Hines, 2006, p. 243). A major conclusion focused on the components of a successful program that includes intensive and specific training for mentors, activities designed

to foster interaction between mentors and foster youth, clear expectations, and ready support should problems arise. The researchers also found that older youth often struggled to trust and form healthy attachments with mentors, but extensive time, patience, and therapy ameliorated some of these concerns. The year two interviews yielded positive results in that the youth respondents described positive interactions and influence from their mentors (Osterling & Hines, 2006). The study identified areas for future work, specifically regarding diversity of mentors to provide cultural relevancy to youth, increased knowledge of and access to resources to support foster youth, and implementation of mentorship partnerships as early in the child's life as possible.

Considerations in Mentoring Programs

The importance of positive and sustainable mentoring partnerships centers on the "frequency and consistency of contact, quality of the connection, and the mentor's approach to the relationship" (Johnson, Pryce, & Martinovich, 2011, p. 54). A study involving 262 foster youth, with one group receiving full Therapeutic Mentoring (TM), one group receiving limited TM, and one group receiving no TM, demonstrated significant gaps in both academic and social achievement between the three groups. Mentoring was implemented for either nine or twelve months, and the groups receiving limited intervention demonstrated less growth and benefit than the comparison groups (Johnson, Pryce, & Martinovich, 2011). These results show that providing limited TM is actually more harmful than implementing none. This is likely because children in the foster care system have experienced trauma through severed relationships, and the intermittent involvement of a mentor is more harmful than no introduction of a positive adult figure. The study also revealed that the longer the mentoring relationship, the better the outcomes for the foster youth.

Staff Training

Staff and trusted adults within the school site can help address the basic needs of foster youth, especially their need for belonging. There is a limited amount of literature on mentors for foster youth, and that which does exist primarily focuses on the generalities of mentorship programs within education. Scannapieco and Painter (2013) discussed foster youth mentorship specifically, and cited the high mobility of foster youth and the lack of specific training for mentors as barriers to academic and social-emotional achievement, yet still found positive results for the youth who received the full term of mentorship.

Children within the foster care system often have immature coping mechanisms and difficulty trusting adults, because those they relied on in the past have shattered their confidence. In addition, foster youth often feel significant guilt and blame in their removal from their families of origin, which negatively affects their abilities to connect with other adults. Unfortunately, these past experiences for "maltreated children contributes to high levels of mistrust in adult caregivers and child welfare practitioners and may often impel abused and neglected children to destructively act out with foster parents, teachers, and other children" (Gonzalez, 2014, p.10). An understanding of these emotional responses serves as the bedrock of maintaining a commitment to a child who appears to reject adult supportive and compassion.

The available research highlights the benefits and challenges to trauma-informed interventions to support foster youth. The presence of a stable and trusted adult in the life of a foster youth improves the potential educational, social, and emotional outcomes for these at-risk children, but a crucial component is on-going effective and support training for these adults.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One concern for foster youth centers on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which Abraham Maslow (1943) defined as a pyramid of needs. If the lower-level needs are neglected, people suffer. The basic physiological needs such as food, water, warmth, and rest form the foundation of the pyramid and dictate essential needs for survival. If these needs are met, the next level focuses on safety and security, then love and belonging, and esteem. As reported by Minton (2008) in the online publication of *Natural News,* "These four levels were considered by Maslow to be deficiency or instinctual needs. If a child is deficient at any of the four levels, he becomes highly compelled to fulfill that need." For many foster youth, these four foundational levels of basic needs remain unmet throughout their multiple placements and with the trauma and neglect that resulted in their involvement in the foster care system. Minton (2008) explained that a child must have a belief in their basic security and needs (food, warmth, shelter), and that without this confidence, they will instinctively focus on survival- and be unable to focus on academics. Children cannot strive for the higher-level growth needs while the lower level needs go unmet. Therefore, cognitive potential is more likely to remain untapped in the child focused on finding fulfillment of their basic needs.

Morris and Melvin (2001) conducted a study that measured students' self-perceptions on their needs and academic achievement. The researchers then extrapolated the resulting data to determine the extent to which need deficiency or adequacy impact their readiness and willingness to learn. Since "research lends considerable support to the view that a positive self-concept is likely to result in high achievement levels; the same field of research indicates that a negative self-concept is likely to be associated with underachievement and failure," the impact of need deficiency should be an area of concern to educators (Morris & Melvin, 2001, p. 2). To

conduct their study, the researchers distributed surveys to 561 students in the state of Alabama between the ages of 11 and 19. The questions focused on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the students' assessment of how well their needs were regularly met. The discrepancy between school experience and needs level was different than anticipated in that most respondents reported a positive school experience, despite feeling that many of their needs were unmet. However, students who reported a negative school experience also reported a high level of unmet needs. The researchers concluded that these responses underscore the importance of educators responding to individual student needs, instead of a generalized approach intended to affect the masses.

After their data analysis, Morris and Melvin (2002) determined that students with a negative self-concept perform poorly in the study of science and gravitated toward English, social sciences, and foreign languages. They suggest this is because science classes typically have high rigor and intellectual expectations, whereas other fields of study cause students to "feel less threatened… and, consequently, their safety levels, already deficient, are not challenged" (Morris & Melvin, 2002, p. 9).

Most of the research supports the importance of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and the relevance to education. A study conducted by Rauschenberger, Schmitt, and Hunter (1980) suggests otherwise. The researchers developed a Markov chain to determine the longitudinal relevance of the needs hierarchy as proposed by Howard Maslow and Clayton Alderfer. Both men shared their understanding of human need and their belief that the lower needs must be met before considering the higher level needs. As these apply to the human condition and are dependent on varying circumstances, these theories are dynamic. Rauschenberger, Schmitt, and Hunter (1980) proposed that their study would disprove the ideas put forth by Maslow and

Alderfer. The researchers mail questionnaires at ten-month intervals to over 500 high school graduates in the Midwest. (Rauschenberger, Schmitt, & Hunter, 1980). Respondents were paid three dollars per questionnaire. Roughly one-quarter of the first set of questionnaires were returned, and the participants were predominantly white females from an above-average socioeconomic background. The resulting data did not support Maslow's theory that one need will always take priority, thus minimizing the importance of the other needs at that time. Respondents identified multiple needs with the same level of gravity. Alderfer did not specifically claim this need exclusion, although he did state that once one need had been satisfied, the individual would move on to a new category. This was also unsupported by the data collected by Rauschenberger, Schmitt, and Hunter (1980). There are some limitations of this study, many of which the researchers point out. The sample size was quite small and homogenous. Of the original 547, approximately 14% completed the full questionnaire (Rauschenberger, Schmitt, & Hunter, 1980). Additionally, the researchers wrote the questions and these contained modifications of the theorist's proposals. These surveys were the sole method of data collection, which is limited in scope. These factors merit consideration when determining the overall relevance and applicability of the study results.

A report by Lester, Hvezda, Sullivan, and Plourde (1983) that focused on the connection between basic needs and psychological health sought to identify a connection between satisfaction of these needs and feelings of fulfilment in life. This study consisted of survey questions related to each of the levels of need, which was anonymously completed by 166 undergraduate students, the administration of the Eysenck Personality Inventory to 66 of these respondents, and a locus of control scale to other respondents. In total, secondary measurements were available for 151 of the 166 survey respondents. The results of the assessments supported

the original hypothesis that the greater satisfaction a person feels in each of Maslow's identified areas of need, the more likely they were to be identified as psychologically healthy.

These findings were also supported by a mixed methods study conducted by Gobin, Teeroovengadum, Becceea, and Teeroovengadum (2012) in which they attempted to "assess the present level of needs of tertiary students with respect to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as it can help to understand students' needs and thus create an environment to enhance learning" (p. 208). Utilizing a Personal Needs Survey distributed to a random sampling, the researchers determined that the respondents either self-identified as having weak to moderately weak or strong to moderately strong needs with the greatest lack in security and safety needs and self-actualization needs. Respondents felt that the public education system fails to meet these needs and necessitates a redesign in order to address these areas for students.

A 2011 study focused specifically on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as experienced by foster youth in placements. While many foster homes strive to meet the basic needs of security and stability, there is a vital need for these critical care responses to be systemized and implemented in all areas of the child's life (Braxton & Krajewski-Jaime, 2011). Fulfilling the crucial lower levels of needs forms a foundation for success in foster youth. However, these researchers found that many foster parents lacked training and/or commitment to move into the higher-level needs necessary for children to grow and realize success. Without further training in these areas, children in care will continue to see their basic needs met but have a higher risk of low self-esteem and poor mental health, which will negatively affect their ability to pursue academic success.

A review of the literature regarding Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs clearly established a connection between meeting basic needs and potential for academic success. Foster youth

"recognized that a lack of autonomy and power, whilst waiting for decisions to be made about their lives, meant that their personal future identity was on standby" (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011, p. 216). This insecurity about their future and the complete lack of control over decisions regarding their lives, create instability and uncertainty which results in a lack of focus and investment in academic pursuits. Efforts to recognize and meet the needs of these children will help provide a safe environment in which they can eventually move up the ladder of needs to a place where education becomes a realistic area of focus.

Legislation

Legislation related to foster youth has focused on increasing stability and opportunity. California has passed legislation regarding educational experiences such as enrollment, rights to school of origin, holders of educational rights, graduation requirements, and inclusion for those identified for Special Education (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2010). Recent changes to the educational funding formula through the California Department of Education (CDE) also aim to increase support for foster youth. The California Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) for schools requires California districts to set goals within their Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAP) for high need student groups, which includes foster youth (Hill & Ugo, 2015). This increased the focus and transparency of educational opportunities and interventions designed to support these at-risk students.

LCFF

Under the LCFF, supplemental grants, which equal 20% of the base grant, are provided to schools for each of the high need students, a definition which includes foster youth (Hill & Ugo, 2015, p. 2). While schools have flexibility in determining their budgetary needs, LCFF requires each district and school site to develop their LCAP describing goals and metrics to

evaluate progress. Schools receiving supplemental grants, "must improve or increase services for high-need students in proportion to the increased funding they receive" (Hill & Ugo, 2015). Concentration grants are available where there are larger populations (greater than 55%) of high need students. However, "individual schools with shares that are above the concentration threshold do not get extra funding unless the district concentration is also above the threshold" (Hill & Ugo, 2015). Therefore, schools may have significant levels of high need students but not qualify for the concentration grant for a subgroup unevenly distributed throughout the district.

California Foster-Specific Legislation

The California Foster Youth Education Task Force (CFYETF) works on behalf of public education students involved in the foster care system. CFYETF studied the implementation and funds allocation to determine how LCAPs have impacted Foster Youth, since being designated as a significant subgroup within the LCFF. CFYETF looked at statistics on foster youth, such as their high likelihood of changing schools at least once per year (four times more likely than their peers), and the increased enrollment of foster youth in non-traditional school settings. Their research focused specifically on districts within Los Angeles County as these districts enrolled a high number (greater than 100) of foster youth. Los Angeles Unified School District alone "has about 8,500 foster youth, over ten times as many foster youth as the next largest district in the state" (CFYETF, 2010, p. 3). This district created several programs to assist foster youth, to include dedicated counselors and administrators whose sole focus is supporting foster youth in their academic pursuits. Throughout Los Angeles County, a primary focus has been on "expenditures on socio-emotional supports such as counselors, school social workers, school-based mental health services, foster youth liaisons, and linkages to community resources, rather than on academic supports" (CFYETF, 2010, p. 7). While these are noteworthy steps to support

foster youth, there is also criticism directed at ensuring these socio-emotional supports do not contradict services already in place by Social Services, and the need to provide resources directed at closing the achievement gaps by providing direct academic support.

CFYETF publishes factsheets reviewing recent legislation and explains how the evolving legislation will affect foster youth, educators, social workers, foster and birth parents, and support providers. California was ahead of the nation in establishing legislation to protect the education needs for foster youth. Prior to the United States Congress passage of The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, California Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490) passed in 2004 and focused on the high mobility rates of foster youth. This bill granted students the right "to remain in her school of origin for the duration of the school year" (CFYETF, 2010) regardless of whether their home address changes. Assembly Bill 490 also ensured timely (within 2 days of the request) transfer of school records when a change of school placement occurs and the immediate enrollment of foster youth regardless of the ability to obtain records typically required for enrollment. CFYETF (2010) also highlighted California Assembly Bill 167/216, (AB 167) which allowed foster youth who change schools within their 11th or 12th grade year to graduate with state graduation requirements instead of meeting district specific requirements. Under this bill, students need 130 credits from a specific list of coursework in order to graduate high school, instead of a district requirement which is typically in the 220-240 credit range. This policy applies to students who are not reasonably able to complete the district graduation requirements within the typical graduation timeline and the foster youth and Educational Rights Holder may request to update their AB 167/216 status at any time should their situation or needs change.

Federal Foster-Specific Legislation

At the Federal level, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) was passed in 1973, although it has undergone numerous revisions and reauthorizations in the ensuing years. At its core, CAPTA establishes the requirement of mandated reporters for those in professions which regularly interact with children, to include (but not limited to) school employees, doctors, therapists, and daycare providers. At each reauthorization, the government has taken on the responsibility "in providing funding for the prevention, investigation, assessment, treatment, and prosecution of child maltreatment" (Gonzalez, 2014, p. 8). This legislation provided guidance and mandates to report suspected child abuse, and to do so within a timely manner.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act- passed by Congress in 2008- addressed the unique needs of foster youth in education. This legislation addressed the right of foster youth to remain in their school of origin when determined to be in the best interest of the child, offered federal funding to offset the costs of transporting foster youth from their residential placement to their school of origin, and provided for the immediate enrollment of foster youth when remaining in their school of origin was not the best option (Chambers & Palmer, 2011). One prevailing concern regarding this legislation centered on the idea of the best interest of the foster youth. Specifically, it prompted the question of who makes this decision. "The law does not state whether the family court judge, the child welfare agency, the school district, the child's attorney, the parent, the foster parent, or some combination of these individuals should oversee this decision" (Chambers & Palmer, 2011, p. 1114). It also does not indicate the factors to consider in reaching a determination of best interest. Federal and state lawmakers have the potential to address these deficiencies by writing clarifying language into

existing legislation. As a starting point, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESEA) "should make clear who is authorized and responsible for making general education decisions for foster youth" (Hahnel, & Van Zile, 2012, p. 440). This clarification would enable both education and child welfare teams to work together and identify a responsible adult to facilitate educational decisions when a parent is unable or unwilling to do so.

While legislation at both the state and federal level has focused on improving opportunities for foster youth and meeting their unique needs, gaps still exist. Increased collaboration between agencies needs to be specifically addressed to allow a comfort level in sharing essential information for these children. The addition of clarifying language within existing laws to specify who has the authority to make educational decisions, and the criteria for determining both a responsible adult and the circumstances leading to this designation will also significantly benefit foster youth (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012) in their ability to successfully participate in an educational program.

Summary

The research consistently identifies students involved in the foster care system at an increased risk of academic challenges in terms of grade-level achievement, progress on standardized assessments, increased inclusion in Special Education, higher drop-out rates, and a lack of post-secondary opportunities in both education and employment (Tyre, 2012). These challenges are rooted in the experiences and maltreatment which led to placement in foster care, lack of stability in foster care placements, need for increased collaboration between agencies, and the absence of a stable and supportive adult to advocate for the child within the educational setting. While there have been significant improvements in recent legislation related to foster youth, more must be done to support this unique and at-risk population. Utilizing the theoretical

framework of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the implementation of trauma informed interventions, to include a mentorship program, to help meet the needs of foster youth will increase the academic achievement of foster youth.

The literature specific to mentorship as an intervention is limited. Thus, this study aims to add to the body of research pertaining to interventions designed to increase academic achievement in foster youth. The literature that does exist references challenges with the training and assignment of mentors; both factors are actively addressed within this study. Throughout the research process, the researcher consistently analyzed needs of foster youth and the assigned mentors to ensure proper and sufficient supports were in place for both parties. The primary goal of the researcher was to address primary needs of foster youth and increase their academic achievement. The means to accomplish this goal was the implementation of a trauma informed intervention of on-site mentorship within the secondary education setting.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Based on the review of literature in Chapter 2, this phenomenological study focused on the development and implementation of a trauma-informed intervention, specifically an on-site mentor, to support foster youth. The following research questions were addressed throughout the process:

1. How does the implementation of an on-site mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development within secondary education?
2. What types of training and support are necessary for secondary school staff to effectively support the unique social-emotional needs of foster youth?
3. According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?

This chapter is organized into the following sections: (a) selection of participants, (b) design of study, (c) instrumentation, (d) data collection, and (e) data analysis.

Sampling Procedures

Due to the specific nature of this study, the researcher utilized purposeful nonprobability sampling as "it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon being studied" (Creswell, 2013, p. 155). Since this study is phenomenological, participants were selected based on their experiences and interactions with the foster care system. Thus, the participants were strictly limited to current and former foster parents, former foster youth, staff mentors, and staff who do not currently serve as mentors. Current and former foster parents included adults who currently or previously received licensing as a foster parent, and who provided care for a child or children within the target range of grades 7-12. The study includes former foster youth to determine the types of interventions and supports they feel would have

been useful during high school. Mentors were selected based on their involvement in the on-site foster youth mentoring program. Staff members who do not currently serve as mentors were selected based on their work location as a secondary school within the target district with a current mentorship program in place.

Selection of Participants

The participants for this study consisted of twenty current or former foster parents, sixty-seven non-mentor staff, eighteen mentors, and fourteen former foster youth. The study took place in a district with a previously implemented a mentorship program, and active partnerships. As part of this program, all foster youth on the target campuses were assigned a mentor, and staff members were assigned up to five current foster youth to mentor, with training sessions developed and delivered by the researcher and the district Coordinator for Foster Youth. The former foster youth participated via interviews to provide insight into their high school experiences and the supports they felt would have benefited them in their academic and social-emotional experiences. Figure 5 shows the breakdown of total participants (*n*=119).

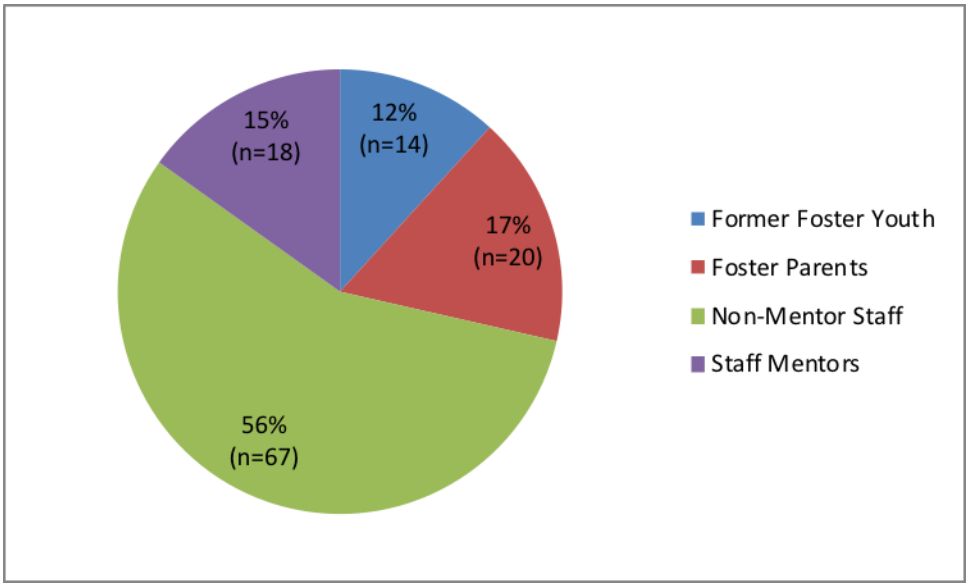

Figure 5. Breakdown of participants

Connection to Literature Review

The review of literature was broken down into five sections: Legislation, Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Trauma-Informed Interventions, Foster Youth Experiences, and Educational Needs and Potential Outcomes. Table 1 lists the connections between the literature of the three latter sections, the research questions, and the proposed instruments. The first two sections of the literature review have not been included, as they are descriptive elements related to the theoretical framework of the study.

Table 1

Connection to Literature Review

Research Question	Proposed Instrument	Conceptual Construct	Literature
How does the implementation of an on-site advisor or mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development?	Survey, Focus Groups	Student sense of connectedness to the school	Baron (2013), Lustig (2008), Morton (2015), Weisman (2012)
How does the implementation of an on-site advisor or mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development?	Survey, Focus Groups	Connection to trusted adult	McCrae, Lee, Barth, and Rauktis (2010), Scannapieco and Painter (2013)
What types of training and support are necessary for school staff to effectively mentor foster youth?	Interviews	Mentor Preparation	Osterling and Hines (2006), Scannapieco and Painter (2013), Tyre (2012), Williams (2011)
What types of training and support are necessary for school staff to effectively mentor foster youth?	Ongoing Google forms to solicit feedback	Mentor Training Needs	Osterling and Hines (2006), Scannapieco and Painter (2013), Tyre (2012), Williams (2011)
According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and	Focus Groups, Survey	Trauma-Informed Interventions	Brown, Baker & Wilcox (2011), RB-Banks & Meyer

communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?			(2017),Soleimanpour, Geierstanger, & Bindis (2017)
According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?	Focus Groups, Survey	Communication of needs and resources; Role of team members	Anyon, Nicotera, and Veeh (2016), Baron (2013), Lustig (2008), Morton (2015), Weisman (2012)

Instrumentation and Measures

A variety of instruments were relied upon for this research study. Surveys (Likert scale and open-ended questions) and focus group interviews were used to determine the social-emotional needs of foster youth and the impact of the mentorship program on these needs. An impartial moderator facilitated the focus groups to avoid researcher-participant bias.

Focus Groups

Focus group interviews were conducted with staff mentors (Appendix C). All questions were open-ended, and began with basic introductions of name, role, and level of involvement (years, structure). The initial six questions focused on interpreting Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs for foster youth within the school setting, implications for foster youth if these needs are not met, risk factors for foster youth, obligations of the educational system to provide interventions to meet these needs. The remaining questions the participants training and experience working as a foster youth mentor. Specifically, the researcher sought to learn if the current training model was sufficient, and any experiences in which the mentors felt unprepared.

Interviews

Former foster youth did not participate in focus groups but instead were individually interviewed in anticipation of discussion of past traumas and to maintain the confidentiality of all

participants' stories. The former foster interview questions (Appendix A) began with demographic information similar to that of the focus groups questions, with the final questions asking specifically about on-campus supports while they were students in high school, suggestions to improve academic and social-emotional outcomes, and experiences with mentoring. These participants were also asked to share the advice they would give a new foster youth starting school tomorrow.

Surveys

Surveys were distributed via email and social media and utilized the online program Qualtics. These were sent to current and former foster parents and to staff mentors who do not currently serve as mentors. The survey for current and former foster parents (Appendix B) consisted of four demographic questions to determine gender, age, involvement with foster care, and their current status as a foster care parent. This was followed by five closed response questions, with two possible answers (i.e., yes or no, completely or not at all) that asked about interactions with the educational setting for their foster child(ren), training, and on-campus support. They also answered one grid style question asking for a ranking of their foster child/ren's familiarity with topics such as college, financial aid, employment, school activities, and school resources and supports. The final four questions were open-ended asking participants to comment on their impressions of a staff mentoring program and ways to better support foster youth on campus. There was a final option for additional comments.

The survey for staff who were not serving as mentors at the time of the study (Appendix D) began with demographic questions addressing their current educational role, longevity in the field, and student groups with whom they currently interact. Following this were five closed response questions, with two possible answers (i.e., yes or no, completely or not at all) which

focused on the staff's knowledge of which students are in foster care, available resources on campus to assist these students, and self-rated ability to support the unique needs of foster youth. The last four questions were open ended, soliciting suggestions to better prepare non-mentor staff members to positively interact and influence foster youth, and a section for additional comments.

Instrument Construction

Survey, focus group, and interview questions were designed by the researcher, in conjunction with the district Foster Youth Liaison. The researcher reviewed the available literature and designed questions based on the focus of the study, evidence from previous literature, and identified gaps in existing research.

Data Collection

This phenomenological study utilized a mixed methods approach to include focus groups, surveys, interviews, and observations (see Figure 6*)*. For the focus group, the researcher served solely as an observer and recorder. The group was facilitated by an impartial moderator and consisted of eighteen staff members from the target schools who were currently serving as mentors. The focus group contained both male and female participants with educational mentorship experiences ranging from six months to four years. The mentorship program studied was in its fourth year of implementation. The mentors were asked open-ended questions (Appendix C) specific to their time as mentors, and included discussion of their experiences with foster youth, expectations going into the program and how these compared to the reality, usefulness of training, adequacy of support, and potential areas of need for further training and/or support.

Interviews with former foster youth included fourteen former foster youth who have aged out of the system. They ranged in age from 18 to 40 and included male and female participants. They were asked open-ended questions (Appendix A) regarding their time as foster youth students, and the types of supports and interventions they felt would have provided additional benefit for their social-emotional and academic achievement. Each of these interviews was video and audio recorded, with participant consent.

Since focus groups reached a limited number of participants, the research also utilized a survey sent via email and social media to 20 current and former foster parents (Appendix B), and sixty-nine staff who do not currently serve as mentors (Appendix D). The surveys reflected questions similar to those asked in the focus groups, but also contained closed-ended questions with structured response options. The researcher compiled the results of these surveys to use as comparison to the focus group responses.

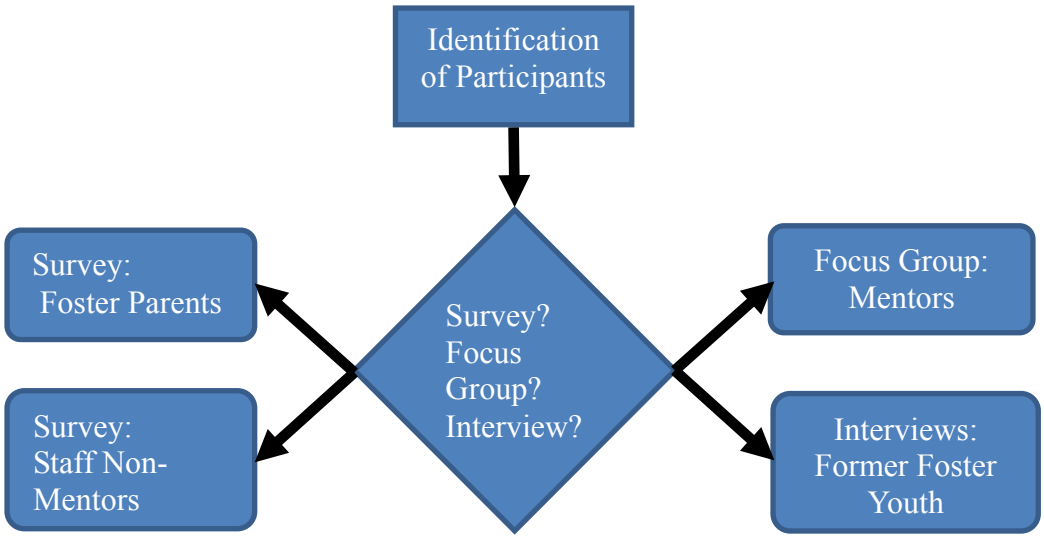

Figure 6. Data collection flow chart

Data Analysis

Upon completion of each focus group and interview, the researcher thoroughly reviewed the transcripts and transcribed initial reactions. The results of the focus groups, surveys,

interviews, and anecdotal information were analyzed using Qualtrics software. This program aided the researcher in identifying overarching themes and clusters from the various data sources. The researcher then coded these themes into the following major areas: student needs, interventions and supports, academic achievement, future/additional needs, and personal experiences. The code labels were identified based on the high frequency with which comments regarding these themes occurred. Table 2 indicates the phrases most often used by participants, broken down by participant grouping (current and former foster parent, former foster youth, mentor, staff non-mentor).

Table 2

Frequently used phrases by stakeholder group

Word/Phrase	Former Foster Youth	Foster Parents	Mentors	Staff Non-Mentors
Attachment		X		
Belonging	X		X	X
Challenge		X		
Communication		X		X
Connection	X		X	X
Counsel	X	X	X	
Esteem			X	
Fear	X		X	
Feelings	X		X	
Learning			X	
Liaison		X		X
Relationship	X	X	X	X
Resources	X	X	X	X
Support	X			X
Trauma	X	X	X	X
Trust	X	X	X	X

The data were validated using data triangulation through the interviews and focus groups of several different groups of the mentoring program. The researcher also utilized member

checking by reviewing transcripts, coding, and themes with selected members of the focus groups and interviews. As the researcher has a clear bias on this topic, objective non-participants were also solicited to provide feedback on conclusions reached through the data collection process. Internal consistency data reliability was determined using interrater reliability as the responses were subjective and therefore reliability was "obtained by correlation techniques" (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008, p. 183).

The quantitative elements utilized in this study come from the surveys distributed which included closed-ended, structured response questions. The results were disaggregated through the Qualtrics data analysis program, which sought high correlation and strength of relationship patterns. This data was then analyzed to find common themes and patterns within the responses to the Likert-scale questions. (see Figure 7).

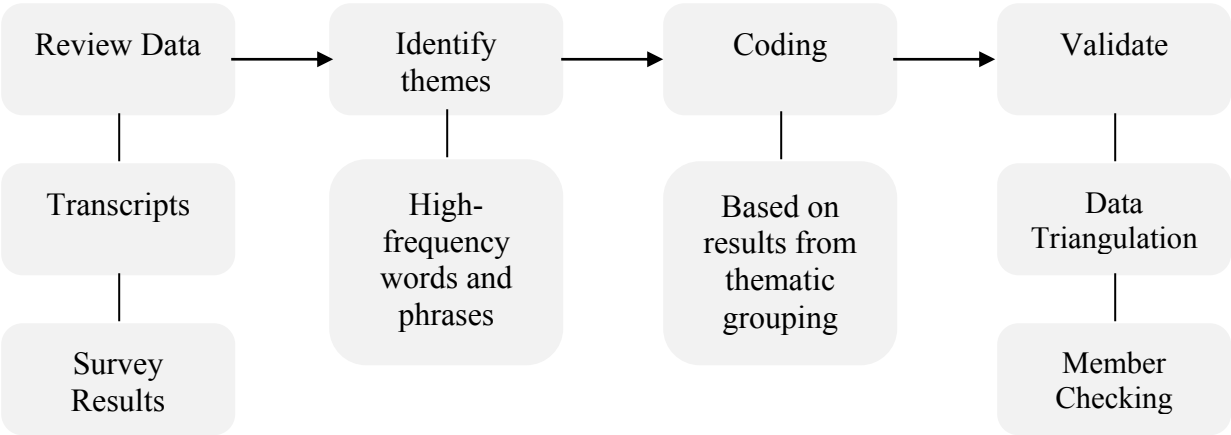

Figure 7. Data analysis flow chart

Ethical Considerations

The target population of foster youth is a highly protected class of students. Confidentiality and sensitivity were of upmost concern. To avoid any potential but accidental trauma and to fully protect confidentiality, the researcher did not include current foster youth as

participants in the study. The researcher worked on one of the campuses where the mentorship program was implemented, and had a pre-existing relationship with some of the former foster youth, foster parents, and mentors involved in the study. All identifying information was changed to protect the identity of participants. The purpose of the study and of the interventions was clearly explained to all participants, and they were repeatedly told their involvement was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The focus group was facilitated by the impartial moderator. Mentors were provided the option of including their name in the study or using a pseudonym. As with all participants, the mentors were provided a description of the purpose of the study and signed written consent forms which they were able to withdraw at any time if they so desired. As the people involved in the study have sensitive and traumatic experiences, the researcher and facilitator were cautious about pushing too far and reading the room to determine if and when breaks or changes in discussion would be beneficial. The focus group facilitator was a licensed school psychologist and an additional licensed school psychologist was available should participants desire individual therapeutic support.

Summary

The purpose of the study was to determine if as structure mentorship program implemented as a trauma informed intervention would meet the social-emotional needs of foster youth, thus allowing them opportunities for increased academic achievement. This was measured by a focus group, individual interviews, and surveys. The ethical considerations of working with a highly protected group were addressed through consent and vigilant confidentiality. The data was analyzed through researcher review and software and validated by triangulation, peer review, and member checking. Results of the data analysis, both qualitative and quantitative, are presented in Chapter 4.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study focused on identifying factors within the secondary school setting that would support foster youth's social-emotional and academic needs. Specifically, an existing program that pairs foster youth (grades 7-12) with on-site staff mentors in a district in Orange County, California was studied to determine if the presence of a stable adult positively influenced the foster youth's social-emotional and academic progress. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) as a theoretical framework, the researcher sought to determine if meeting lower level needs of safety and belonging would support foster youth in moving into the realm of self-actualization where learning may occur. While highlighting this specific intervention, the study also addressed tangential questions relating to the necessary training for mentors to effectively support foster youth and the importance of communication throughout the foster youth team to ensure all parties work together towards common goals.

The researcher obtained data for this mixed methods phenomenological study through several means and from a variety of stakeholders. Representing the school site team members, surveys were distributed at two school sites: one middle school serving grades seven and eight and one high school serving grades nine through twelve. These surveys focused on staff, both certificated and classified, who do not currently serve as mentors but who work in schools with an existing mentorship program within the focus district. In addition, staff members from four high schools, three middle schools, and two alternative educational settings serving grades seven through twelve who have mentorship assignments were invited to participate in a focus group facilitated by an impartial moderator. Outside the school setting, current and former foster parent input was solicited via surveys, and the researcher and an impartial facilitator conducted individual interviews of former foster youth over the age of eighteen. All surveys were

distributed via social media and email. Focus groups and interviews were held at a school site within the studied district.

Participants

For this study, key stakeholder groups participated through focus groups, individual interviews, and electronic surveys. Tables 3-6 reflect the demographics of the participants.

Fourteen former foster youth participated through individual interviews, conducted by an impartial moderator and the researcher. Of these, 50% (*n*=7) were between the ages of 18-25, 22% (*n*=3) were between the ages of 26-30, 14% (*n*=2) were between the ages of 31-35, and 14% (*n*=2) were between the ages of 36-40. When asked about graduation status, 50% (*n*=7) graduated with full credits, 22% (*n*=3) through a waiver or reduced credits, 14% (*n*=2) earned a General Educational Development or high school equivalency, 7% (*n*=1) completed their requirements through Adult Education, and 7% (*n*=1) did not complete high school exit requirements. Legislation passed in 2010 allows foster youth who changed schools in grades eleven or twelve to graduate with reduced credits according to the state of California graduation requirements instead of those set by a specific district, and this change should be considered when reviewing participant graduation status (CFYETF, 2010). Fourteen percent (*n*=2) of the respondents reported living in a foster home at the time of high school completion, 58% (*n*=8) in a group home, and 28% (*n*=4) lived independently. Legislation passed in 2008 allows foster youth the option to remain in care until age 21 (CFYETF, 2010).

Table 3

Former Foster Youth Demographics

Current Age Range	Number of Respondents	Graduation Status	Residential Status During High School
18 – 25	7	Graduate with full credits: 4 Graduate with wavier/reduced credits: 3 GED: 0 Adult Education: 0 Did not complete high school or the equivalent: 0	Foster Home: 1 Group Home: 5 Independent: 1 Kinship Care: 0
26 – 30	3	Graduate with full credits: 2 Graduate with wavier/reduced credits: 0 GED: 0 Adult Education: 1 Did not complete high school or the equivalent:0	Foster Home: 0 Group Home: 3 Independent: 0 Kinship Care: 0
31 – 35	2	Graduate with full credits: 1 Graduate with wavier/reduced credits: 0 GED: 1 Adult Education: 0 Did not complete high school or the equivalent: 0	Foster Home: 1 Group Home: 0 Independent: 1 Kinship Care: 0
36 – 40	2	Graduate with full credits: 0 Graduate with wavier/reduced credits: 0 GED: 1 Adult Education: 0 Did not complete high school or the equivalent: 1	Foster Home: 0 Group Home: 0 Independent: 2 Kinship Care: 0

Twenty current and former foster parents were surveyed, with 55% female (*n*=11) and 45% male (*n*=9). Participants were asked their current level of involvement with the foster care system, with provided choices of permanently inactive (35%, n=7), temporarily inactive (0%, n=0), active with current placement of foster child/ren (45%, n=9), or active without current placement of foster child/ren (20%, n=4). Participants were grouped into the age ranges of 30-35 (20%, n=4), 36-40 (25%, n=5), 41-45 (15%, n=3), 46-50 (5%, n=1), 51-55 (20%, n=4), 56-60 (15%, n=3).

Table 4

Current and Former Foster Parent Demographics

Age Range	Number of Respondents	Gender	Current Foster Status
30-35	4	M = 1 F = 3	Inactive permanently: 2 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 2 Active without placement: 0
36-40	5	M = 2 F = 3	Inactive permanently: 1 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 2 Active without placement: 2
41-45	3	M = 0 F = 3	Inactive permanently: 2 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 1 Active without placement: 0
46-50	1	M = 1 F = 0	Inactive permanently: 0 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 0 Active without placement: 1
51-55	4	M = 2 F = 2	Inactive permanently: 1 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 2 Active without placement: 1
56-60	3	M = 1 F = 2	Inactive permanently: 1 Inactive temporarily: 0 Active with placement: 2 Active without placement: 0

The study focused on an existing mentorship program within a school district in Orange, California, for foster youth in grades seven through twelve. This program began in the 2015-16 school year; the study was conducted during the fourth year of implementation. Eighteen mentors participated in a focus group facilitated by an impartial moderator and the researcher. Of these eighteen participants, 33% (n=6) have been involved in the program for the full four

years. Twenty-two percent (*n*=4) have mentored for three years, with an additional 22% (*n*=4) involved for two years. 17% (*n*=3) have mentored for one year and 6% (*n*=1) are within their first year. All mentors except the one with less than a year of experience mentor five students. The newest mentor is assigned three students.

Table 5

Staff Mentor Demographics

Number of years serving as a mentor	Number of Participants	Grades Served		Number of students assigned
		7-8	9-12	
<1	1	0	1	3
1	3	1	2	5
2	4	1	3	5
3	4	2	2	5
4	6	2	4	5

The final group of participants was school site staff members within the target district who work with students in grades seven through twelve, but do not currently participate as mentors. These respondents participated through online surveys and included classified staff, teachers, and administration and support. For the purpose of this study, administration and support included administrators and certificated personnel in student support roles such as nurse, school psychologist, or counselor. Of the 69 participants, 13% (*n*=9) fell into the administration and support category, with an average of twenty years in education. Seventy-one percent (*n*=49) were certificated teachers with an average of fourteen years in education, and 16% (*n*=11) identified as classified employees with an average of ten years in education.

Table 6

Non-Mentor Staff

Role	Total Respondents	Average number of years in education	Grades 7-8	Grades 9-12
Administrative/Support	9	20	3	6
Certificated	49	14	16	33
Classified	11	10	5	6

Data According to the Research Questions

This study utilized a mixed-methods design that is designed to focus on qualitative data to explore the research questions, and quantitative data is utilized to increase the significance of the qualitative findings (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). A fixed design allowed the researcher to determine when and how to use qualitative and quantitative input prior to beginning the research phase. The results from the study are presented in response to individual research questions and organized by the specific stakeholders for each area of study. Table 7 demonstrates which instrument items per subgroup addressed each research question.

Table 7

Instrument items used to respond to research questions

Research Question	Former Foster Youth	Foster Parent	Staff Mentor	Staff Non-Mentor
One: How does the implementation of an on-site mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development within the secondary education setting?	4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9	5, 6, 7, 10	5, 6	7, 8
Two: What types of training and support are necessary for secondary school staff to effectively support the unique social-emotional needs of foster youth?	4, 5, 6	8, 9, 13	8, 9, 10	3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10
Three: According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?	10	12	7, 8, 12, 13	4, 10

Research Question One

How does the implementation of an on-site mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development within the secondary education setting?

Former Foster Youth

The researcher and an impartial facilitator individually interviewed fourteen former foster youth, ranging from current age eighteen to forty. The interviews consisted of nine prepared questions (Appendix A), each recorded with participant consent. The focus of each interview was to determine how foster youth felt while in middle and high school (defined for this study as grades seven through twelve) and if they had a trusted adult on their campuses. Each participant was asked to reflect back on their school experiences to determine the challenges they faced and interventions that may have supported their unique experiences as foster youth.

Figure 8 displays the responses to three questions. When asked "How connected did you feel to your school?" 64% (n=9) felt not at all connected and 36% (n=5) felt completely connected. When asked "Were you aware of resources on campus to help you as a foster youth?" 79% (n=11) were not at all aware and 21% (n=3) were completely aware. When asked "Did you feel there was a trusted adult, on campus, to help you while you were at school?" the responses skewed positive with 57% (n=8) who replied definitely yes and 43% (n=6) who replied definitely no. The responses by age group reflect younger participants feeling more connected and aware of resources than their older counter-parts. All of the respondents (n=8) who indicated they felt connected and were aware of available resources came from the 18-25 age range. Fifty-seven percent of respondents (n=8) felt they had a trusted adult on campus. These responses came from the age ranges of 18-25 (n=6) and 26-30 (n=2). None of the participants over the age of 31 felt they had access to a trusted adult while in high school.

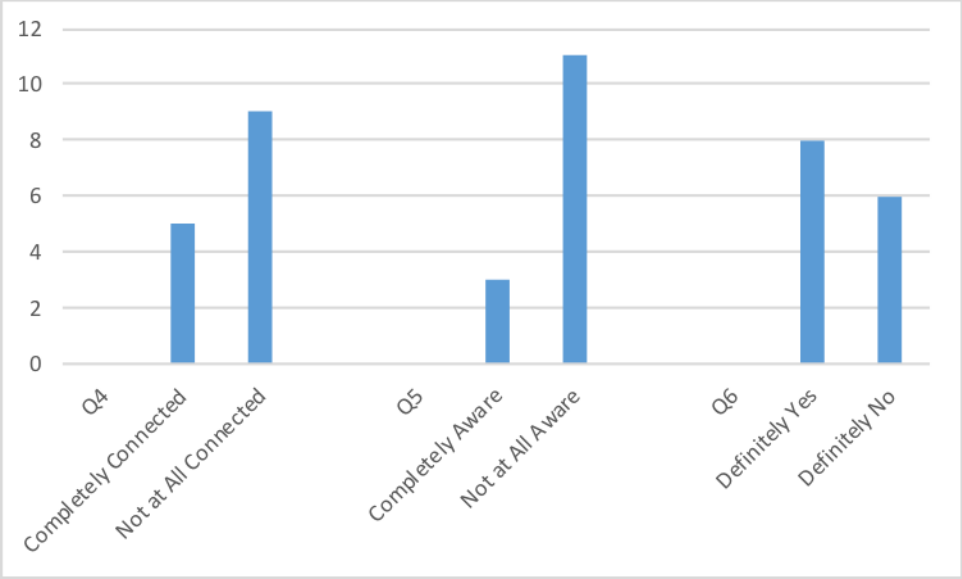

Figure 8. Foster youth reported levels of connectedness

Looking at specific areas of high-school connectedness, participants were asked to rate how informed they felt about specific resources: college, financial aid, employment, school activities, and school supports and resources within their school setting. For this question, college and financial aid resources included tuition, Guardian's Scholars, and other specialized programs designed to support foster youth. Employment resources included work permits, resume and interview skills, and job search resources. School activities, supports, and resources include classroom supplies, access to clubs and extracurricular activities, graduation waivers, and mentors. Former foster youth did not feel informed about college, with 29% (n=4) indicating they were not at all informed and 36% (n=5) felt somewhat informed. For financial aid, 36% (n=5) felt not at all informed and 36% (n=5) felt somewhat informed. When asked about employment, 21% (n=3) of participants indicated they were not at all informed and 29% (n=4) felt they were somewhat informed. Respondents felt informed about school activities, supports, and resources with 50% (n=7) indicating they were completely or mostly informed about school activities and 29% (n=4) indicating they were completely or mostly informed about supports and

resources. Table 8 displays the full scale of responses regarding former foster youth feelings of connectedness and knowledge of available resources.

Table 8

Former Foster Youth Responses to levels of connectedness

Question	Completely Informed		Mostly Informed		Neutral		Somewhat Informed		Not at All Informed	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
College	14%	2	14%	2	7%	1	36%	5	29%	4
Financial Aid	14%	2	7%	1	7%	1	36%	5	36%	5
Employment	21%	3	14%	2	14%	2	29%	4	21%	3
School Activities	29%	4	21%	3	7%	1	21%	3	21%	3
School Supports and Resources	29%	4	14%	2	14%	2	21%	3	21%	3

Participants were also asked open-ended questions based on their reflections and memories of their time in high school, and asked to share their experiences of this time. The first of these asked, "If you had a trusted adult on campus, how did they help you with your school experience?" The responses focused on an individual staff member who took time to talk to the student and try to provide support. In some cases, this relationship resembled a mentorship pairing, such as an English teacher who obtained supplies for the student and monitored grades and classes. In another student's case, it was an adult who noticed the student and would check in, such as the custodian who took the time to ask about the student's day when he saw the student waiting late for a ride. Table 9 displays a representative sample of responses to this question.

Table 9

Survey responses explaining how trusted adults helped former foster youth

Former Foster Youth Code	Survey Response
FFY 1	My counselor really took the time to get to know me and understand what my life was like. I could go to her for anything and she would make time to see me.
FFY 2	I started high school the same day I moved into a new group home. My English teacher helped me get supplies for class, and checked in with me. She kept track of all my classes and helped me when I let things slide. I left that school in 10th grade when I moved to a new group home. I'm 28 now and I still talk to that teacher.
FFY 5	For me it wasn't a teacher, it was actually the custodian. I didn't get picked up until late every day so I sat at the lunch tables for hours. He started talking to me, asking if I was okay. He was just there if I needed to talk.
FFY 7	I didn't have a trusted adult, but probably because I moved. A lot, like, a few times a year. I was never at a school long enough for anyone to care.
FFY 11	The librarian. I love to read. Loved it in middle school and high school. Still love it. The librarian at my middle school took the time to talk about books with me. She never pushed me to talk about anything else. But we talked a lot about books. It was nice to have somebody not always asking hard questions.

When asked if they felt foster youth would benefit from an on campus staff mentor, all respondents (n=14) conditionally answered yes. However, 64% (n=9) included that agreement and buy-in from the student would be essential to a successful partnership, and 79% (n=11) used the word trust in their response, with Former foster youth 06 stating "When you're in the system, you learn not to trust anybody. The adults will have to be okay with knowing this, and trying to build a relationship where trust isn't required, at least for a while." This represents the content of other responses, which all indicate that trust is a challenging consideration for foster youth.

Foster Parents

Foster parents, both current and former, participated in the study through online surveys. The questions related to the foster parent(s) impression(s) of school connectedness and available resources. When asked, "How connected do/did you feel to your students school?" 80% of respondents (*n*=16) felt completely connected and 20% (*n*=4) felt not at all connected (Figure 9).

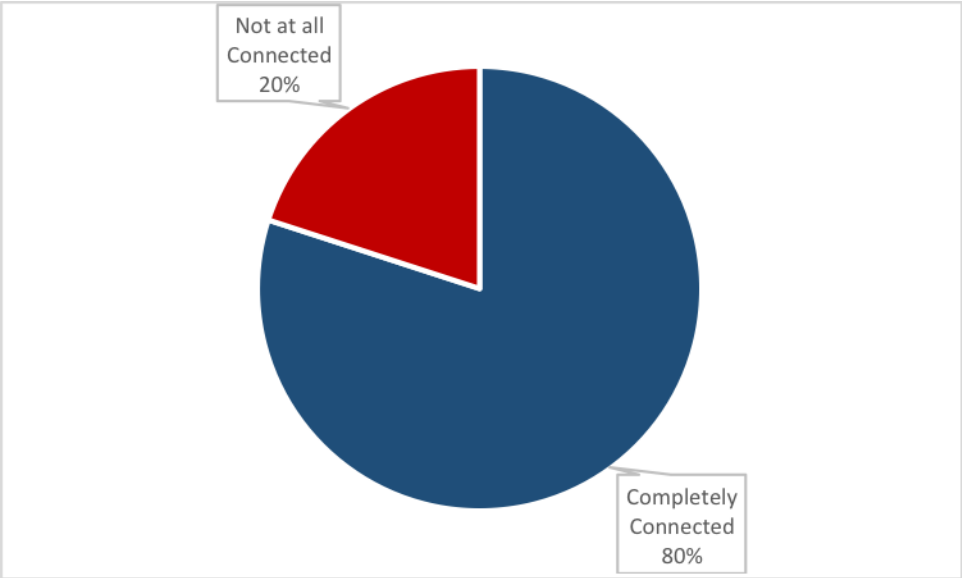

Figure 9. Foster parents reported levels of connectedness

When asked, "Were/Are you aware of resources on campus to help you, as a foster parent?" 45% of respondents (*n*=9) felt completely aware and 55% (*n*=11) felt not at all aware. (Figure 10)

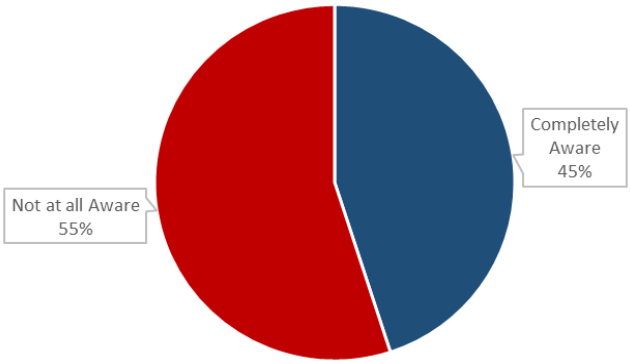

Figure 10. Foster parents' familiarity with on-campus resources

When asked, "Do/Did you feel there is/was a trusted adult, on campus, to help your student while they are/were at school?" 93% of respondents (*n*=18) answered completely yes and 7% (*n*=2) completely no. (*Figure 11)*

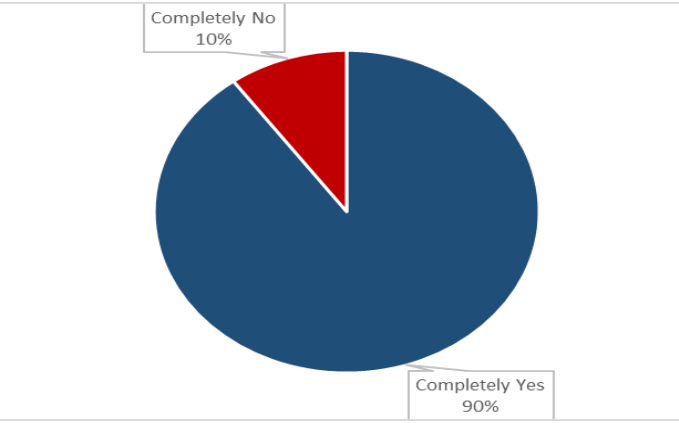

Figure 11. Foster parents' beliefs that their student has/had a trusted adult on campus

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors participated through focus groups and answered primarily open-ended questions designed to facilitate discussion among the group. Specific to research question one, mentors were presented with a chart representing Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Figure 12) and responded to questions regarding implications, risk factors, and considerations for foster youth falling on the lower levels of the hierarchy.

When asked what implications they see for foster youth based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, responses focused on the lower level needs and that many foster youth are struggling with lower level needs. Table 10 provides a representative display of responses to this question.

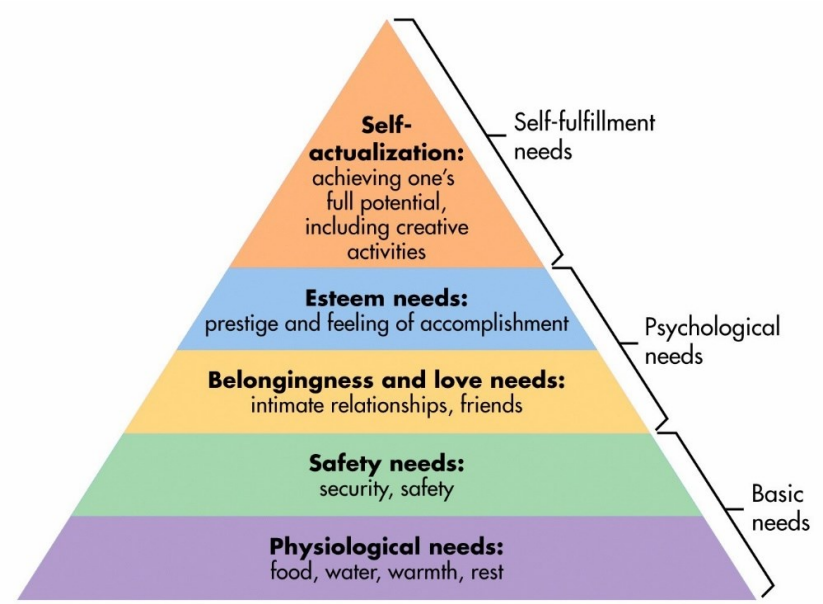

Figure 12. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs
McLeod, S. (2017). Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. *Simply Psychology*. Retrieved from https://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html

Table 10

Staff mentor responses to focus group question five

Staff Mentor Code	Focus Group Response
SM 1	This group of students often come to school with Basic and Psychological needs not fully met.
SM 9	Due to their situation foster and homeless youth spend most of the their time concerned with their physiological needs which affects every aspect of their lives.
SM 13	After looking over this chart and working with foster/homeless youth, it's clear that for our students to achieve their full potential they must first meet the basic and psychological needs of the pyramid. Many of our homeless students go without adequate food, water, and rest. Without meeting these physiological needs, it's impossible for teachers/educators to expect them to be active participates in their learning. Foster children living outside of a family members home, often moved from placement to placement, typically has little sense of belonging and inhibits the child from creating intimate relationships.

Staff Non-Mentors

Staff who do not currently serve as mentors participated via electronic survey and answered a total of fourteen questions: three related to participant demographics and represented in Table x, four yes-or-no questions relating to their familiarity with foster youth on their campus and services and resources available, and four open-ended free response questions regarding their ideas to support foster youth. Specific to research question one, respondents provided input through two of these questions. First, they answered the yes-or-no question "Are you familiar with the site mentorship program?" Fifty-four percent (*n*=37) of the participants were familiar with the program and 46% (*n*=32) were not. (Figure 13)

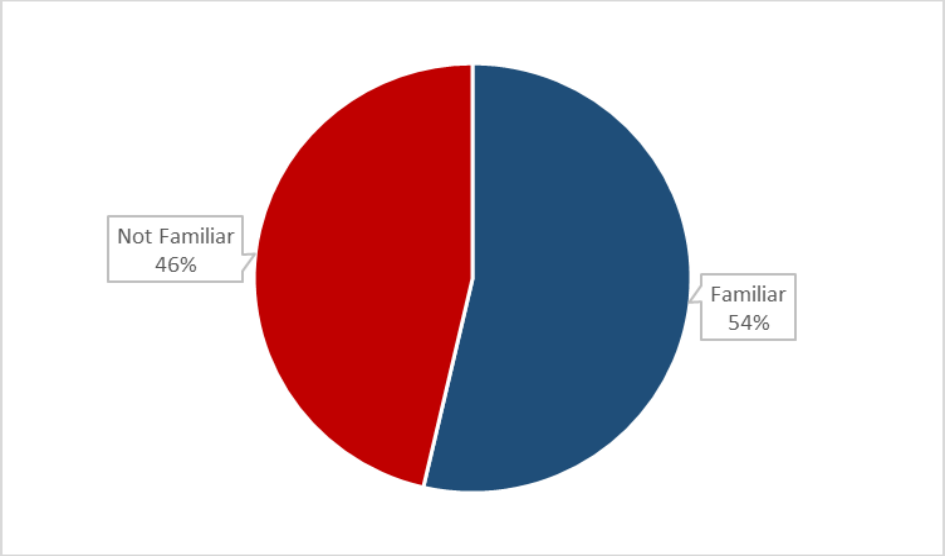

Figure 13. Staff non-mentors familiarity with the mentorship program on their campus

When asked the open-ended question, "Do you feel an assigned, on-site staff mentor benefits foster youth?" the majority of staff (*n*=64) responded in the affirmative (Table 11). Those who did not were either unsure or felt it depended on the individual student. No responses indicated complete opposition to the idea of a staff mentor. Table 11 includes representative samples from this free response question.

Table 11

Non-Mentor Response to the Benefits of an On-Site Mentor

Non-Mentor Staff Code	Survey Response
NMS 02	Yes, that individual is an additional resource for the student.
NMS 08	Yes, I was a foster student myself in high school and benefitted from a staff mentor!
NMS 12	Unsure. Depends on the kid.
NMS 17	Yes, if the mentor is emotionally available and has an understanding of how to support their mentee.
NMS 23	Yes, they need at least one specific staff member to help support them to make sure they aren't forgotten about.
NMS 38	Yes because the mentor becomes part of the student's life in a deliberate and intentional manner. The mentor can/should let particular staff who request to help assist the student in appropriate ways.
NMS 39	Yes, because an assigned staff member can better track and stay in close contact with student.
NMS 55	Yes - the more trusted adults in a students life, the better

Research Question Two

What types of training and support are necessary for secondary school staff to effectively support the unique social-emotional needs of foster youth?

Former Foster Youth

Former foster youth input was solicited for this research question through three close-ended questions regarding their awareness of resources on campus and their overall feelings of connectedness to the school. Understanding the participant's feelings in these areas provides input as to the types of training mentors may need to effectively support foster youth mentees.

The first question asked, "How connected did you feel to your school?" Thirty-six percent (*n*=5) replied completely connected and 64% (*n*=9) replied not at all connected. They were next asked, "Were you aware of resources on campus to help you as a foster youth?" Twenty-one percent (*n*=3) reported being completely aware and 79% (*n*=11) reported being not at all aware. The final question was "Did you feel there was a trusted adult, on campus, to help you while you were at school?" Fifty-seven percent (*n*=8) responded definitely yes and 43% (*n*=6) responded definitely no. Figure 14 displays their responses to these three questions.

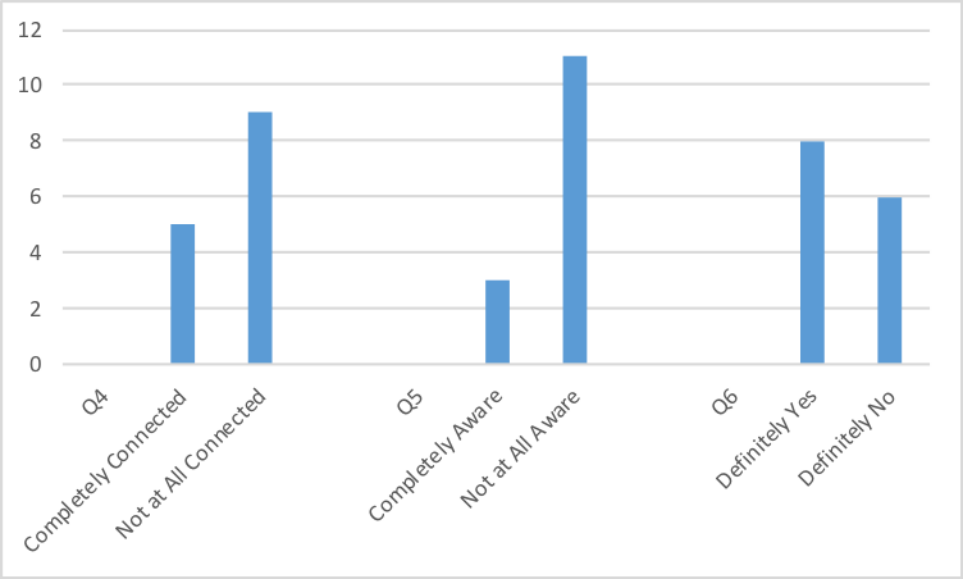

Figure 14. Foster youth reported levels of connectedness

Foster Parents

Foster parent input for this question was solicited through questions focused on their foster youth connectedness to school and knowledge of specific topics: college, financial aid, employment, school activities, and school supports and resources. Foster parents responded that overall, they did not feel their students had familiarity with topics relating to campus connectedness and post-secondary goals. Table x displays the responses from foster parents regarding their perceptions of their foster youths familiarity with college, financial aid,

employment, school activities, and school supports and resources. The responses from foster parents are similar to those from former foster youth when asked the same questions (see Table 12).

Table 12

Former foster youth response to levels of connectedness

Question	Completely Informed		Mostly Informed		Neutral		Somewhat Informed		Not at All Informed	
	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n
College	15%	3	20%	4	25%	5	15%	3	25%	5
Financial Aid	15%	3	10%	2	40%	8	15%	3	20%	4
Employment	20%	4	0%	0	30%	6	25%	5	25%	5
School Activities	25%	5	40%	8	0%	0	20%	4	15%	3
School Supports and Resources	25%	5	30%	6	5%	1	25%	5	15%	3

Foster parents were also asked an open-ended question regarding the types of training they felt would benefit school staff in supporting foster youth. The answers primarily focused on attachment and trauma training, with 85% (*n*=17) of the participants including these within their responses. Another respondent summarized that training should focus on "attachment based therapy with focus on trauma and what it looks like, ACEs – what they are and how they affect kids (both health-wise, mentally, and socially). Really anything is better than nothing" (FP 19). When asked if foster parents felt they had received adequate training to respond to the needs of foster youth prior to becoming foster parents, 70% (*n*=14) responded definitely not while 30% (*n*=6) responded they definitely felt prepared as a result of their training.

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors were asked three questions related to their past training and their experiences with the students they mentor. Table 13 provides a representative sample of responses to the question, "Are there things the school can and/or should be doing to meet these

needs and help students move up the pyramid? If so, what are they?" The responses varied from stocking a food pantry and clothes closet for foster youth to providing better communication and training to other staff regarding the effects of foster care on students.

Table 13

Staff mentor responses to moving students up the pyramid of needs

Staff Mentor Code	Focus Group Question Response
SM 06	I believe that mentor programs are essential to foster and homeless youth success inside of the school. Having a trusted go-to person allows these students to connect with someone. Creating a positive and supportive environment where the student feels safe is important when meeting the needs of the student. I also think that counseling services would be beneficial for our connections students. Schools should also connect these students with community resources that can assist them outside of school.
SM 11	Schools should provide a variety of resources for all student needs. These resources could range from mental supports, such as the mentor programs, to clothing closets that will provide free clothing. Another resources that could benefit these students is providing a safe place for them to do laundry and take care of their personal hygiene.
SM 14	Mentors at our school fund a food shelf to provide before and after school snacks to any student in the program who is in need and requests something such as a granola bar or peanut butter cracker package. Funding from the school for this need would be great.
SM 17	The school can create programs to serve this population by partnering foster youth with teachers who are interested in assisting in their efforts. The school/district should also provide training for program teachers to give them tips and tools for impacting foster youth.
SM 18	Because our school has had a large turnover in staff the past few years, we would benefit from a general understanding of what our Connections students go through, not a case by case explanation, but from an overall perspective. Additionally, our campus should have an overall agreement on how best to support these students academically. Some teachers are very sympathetic and will accept late work. Unfortunately, some teachers do not understand how foster/homelessness may affect a student. These teachers have classroom policies that do not support foster/homeless support. In these cases, mentor involvement with the teacher can make a difference, and help foster/homeless students raise grades. We have mentors to help on a case by case basis, but it would be beneficial for all on campus to have trauma informed instruction training.

Staff mentors were also asked to describe the frequency and types of interactions that typified their relationship with their mentees. Of the eighteen participating mentors, seventeen are assigned five foster youth with the newest mentor assigned to three. The researcher coded the responses into a qualitative code book; Figure 15 displays the most frequently occurring terms. On average, most mentors meet with their assigned students weekly, although they shared that this is dependent on the specific student as some seek out more interaction and some less. One mentor shared,

> the students who are receptive seem to be in the acceptance stage of their situation whereas those who reject being mentored seem to be in more of an anger or denial stage. Sadly, many foster youth do not trust adults, for good reason (SM 07).

The topics discussed range from how they spent their weekend to specific needs of the student. The overwhelming message from the mentors was that each relationship is individual, and attempts to generalize contradict the specific needs of foster youth. All mentors agreed that trust is important, and that foster youth tend to need time before this trust can be established. Patience and consistency on the part of the adult were shared as the most important characteristics of a mentor, which is illustrated by staff mentor 09's experience. He stated that he

> had one student who was angry and always told me they were fine. I sent a call slip every Monday, and he angrily showed up every week. I knew he could blow off the call slip, so I took it promising that he kept showing up. After about six months of this, he finally started to trust me.

When asked what advice the mentors would give a new mentor, the themes of patience and consistency prevailed. Each mentor had examples of student rejection, but also of student acceptance and the importance of mentors balancing these emotional responses was emphasized.

Figure 15. Word cloud of common terms from mentors' focus group discussion

The final topic of discussion related to research question two focused on the training the mentors have received as part of their involvement in the program. Specifically, they were asked if they felt this training had adequately prepared them to work with the foster youth to whom they were assigned. All mentors (n=18) felt that the training had been useful and pertinent to the work they are doing. They mentioned trauma informed instruction and an understanding of the foster care system as two of the most relevant trainings they have attended, with one mentor sharing "it helps to remember the factors behind the behavior and patterns students exhibit in the journey to help them grow" (SM 02). The mentors also shared that some of their training

sessions involved former foster youth speaking about their middle and high school experiences, and they felt this was the most meaningful for their personal and professional growth. Staff mentor 01 shared, "Getting to talk with successful adult students who grew up foster/homeless was one of the best experiences I have had thus far. It was so insightful to hear their own experiences and what they feel would have helped them in their youth." All mentors agreed they would not feel as comfortable serving in this role without the training they received within the program.

Staff Non-Mentors

The staff non-mentors answered four survey questions in direct response to research question two. The first two questions were yes-or-no responses relating to the mentorship program and staff comfort levels in providing support and resources for foster youth. All participants work on sites where the mentorship program is active. When asked if they were familiar with this program, 54% (n=37) responded yes and 46% (n=32) responded no. When asked if they felt adequately prepared to support foster youth should they approach these staff members for help, 64% (n=44) responded yes and 36% (n=25) responded no.

These participants also answered two open-ended questions focused on the resources available to assist them, as staff members, should foster youth approach them for help, and if there are ways the school can improve this support. The staff responses indicated a lack of familiarity with specific available resources with one respondent stating, "anything and everything that one may find at a school" (SNM 05) and another sharing "staff members that assist in those areas" (SNM 24). Many of the responses included a list of personnel to include counselors, school psychologists, administration, and the district foster youth liaison. The most frequently reported comment (by n=44) was a way for staff to identify the foster youth with

whom they interact. Table 14 provides a representative sample of the participants' suggestions on how their school may better support foster youth.

Table 14

Staff non-mentor response to increasing support for foster youth

Staff Non-Mentor Code	Survey Response
SNM 08	I know that kind of information is needs to know, but it would be nice to know who all of those students were.
SNM 16	make it known to the students where they can go with out outing them.
SMN 33	Aeries doesn't reveal to all teachers who these students are. I wonder if it were easier for teachers to identify their foster youth, then maybe we would be more attuned to their needs as homeless/foster youth.
SNM 36	I think that all staff, including classified, should be provided some training, at several levels to help be able to work more with these kids. There are so many kids, not only on our campus, but in the system, that we should all be trained so we can learn how to be better support to these kids.
SNM 42	give them priority registration; put them in classes with the most caring, patient, understanding teachers; free lunch; free supplies; implement a 0 tolerance policy if these kids are harassed or bullied; assign a good adult mentor; make free tutoring available; always make sure their teachers know they are foster youth
SNM 50	I would like to see our school provide a list of students and then subsequently offer opportunities for staff to assist with clothing, gifts, support, opportunities for outings, etc. for the students. Especially in high school, these kids truly know what is going on and are facing a very difficult, isolating, and stressful situation when they turn 18 and are then totally responsible for themselves unless they have had a support team surrounding them. Humans never grow out of the need of support and care and being loved. I believe that if we took care of our teens as well as the system cares for the younger children, we might see a dynamic positive change in society.

Research Question Three

According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?

Former Foster Youth

Former foster youth were asked what advice they would give a foster youth starting a new school tomorrow. The responses focused on the importance of finding connections on campus, through activities, clubs, sports, or classes of interest to the new student and through teachers or other trusted adults on campus. Former foster youth 008 shared the advice that a new student should "get involved in a club, a CTE [Career Technical Education] pathway, a sport or activity. I would advise the student to be open to all the support being offered to them and to forge relationships with adults who can guide toward a brighter future". All responses (n=14) mentioned involvement in school activities and 86% (n=12) included advice regarding talking to teachers and seeking out support from adults on campus.

Foster Parent

Foster parents were asked how the school system can improve its support of foster youth through an open-ended free response question. The answers were varied, with few common themes emerging. One suggestion that did arise with some frequency was a centralized contact person at the school site. Thirty-five percent of the responses (n=7) mentioned this idea to some extent, although there were disparate suggestions on whether this would be a counselor, teacher, administrator, or the more generic term of liaison. Another relatively common theme was the importance of understanding the available resources and how these may be accessed. Foster parents also suggested additional training in conjunction with the schools, to increase connections and communication between the team members supporting foster youth. The foster parents were varied in their opinions as to whether it was a benefit or a hindrance for foster youth to be identified to staff. Table 15 provides a list of the different responses to this question.

Table 15

Foster parent response to increasing support for foster youth

Foster Parent Code	Survey Response Question
FP 03	Make it easier to get resources - be more open about what is available and what they are willing to do for you.
FP 04	Having a specific person as a liaison
FP 07	Acknowledge them as a typical student and not one in foster care. It labels them
FP 10	Make sure the staff knows who is foster
FP 11	Assign one counselor for all foster kiddos
FP 14	I think periodic training on the unique position and challenges of foster students could help foster more campus awareness.
FP 15	Informing teachers and admin with the behavior issues related to trauma
FP 16	They can have a direct contact there, as well as direct line to first parent.
FP 18	More support such as counseling and social groups. It's hard to get outside therapy while trying to work as a single foster mom.
FP 19	monthly meetings with a guidance councilor [sic] who is trained with dealing with foster kids.
FP 20	Have a teacher as a contact person

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors were asked to share their thoughts on the risk factors they identified for foster youth, especially those on the lower tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). The responses focused on the concerns of students not moving into self-actualization, losing confidence in themselves and their education, and the unpredictability inherent in the foster care system. Eighty percent of the responses (n=14) included themes of instability, insecurity,

disengagement, and disenfranchisement. Table 16 displays a representative sample of the responses to this open-ended free response discussion.

Table 16

Staff mentor responses to risk factors for foster youth

Staff Mentor Code	Focus Group Response
SM 02	Foster youth may disengage from their education (low attendance/poor grades) which can negatively impact their future. Education is the only way out of poverty so it is critical for mentors to provide encouragement for the foster youth to stay on target. Our influence is limited and oftentimes unsuccessful but when a connection is made, the impact can be substantial.
SM 03	The most significant concern is that students will not reach the higher levels toward self-actualization because they are not able to move beyond the basic needs level.
SM 07	The risk factors for foster youth can be the instability of their basic needs. Changing group homes and personalities within group homes can create crisis knocking the student down to struggling to meet basic needs. Unstable parent interaction can be another risk factor causing our foster youth to waver between higher levels of the hierarchy and the bottom. Finally, past trauma can lock our foster youth into the lower levels despite stable environments.
SM 09	Risk factors for foster youth when considering lower and higher level needs include adjusting to a new social setting without previously built relationships with peers and adults, negative behaviors (acting out) use of drugs, internalizing emotional/physical trauma, inability to trust others, lower levels of academic achievement.
SM 13	The biggest factor is feeling disenfranchised. They do not feel like they are part of their community.
SM 14	Sometimes these students have been uprooted so many times and/or had their needs for food, water, warmth and rest neglected so they have a hard time connecting with peers at a new school, feeling good about themselves and therefore being able to self-actualize, or reach their potentials.
SM 16	Trusting people in general and then trusting those who are helping them.

Staff Non-Mentors

When asked if they were aware of the foster youth with whom they may interact, 60% (*n*=41) of staff who do not currently serve as mentors indicated they are aware, and 40% (*n*=28) responded they are not aware. When asked an open-ended free response question regarding how the school system can improve its support of foster youth on the campus, 57% (*n*=39) of the responses included a way for staff to identify students who are in the foster care system to enable timely and targeted supports. Figure 16 displays the major themes of interests, understanding life in the foster care system, the mentorship program, how to access resources, and knowledge of who the foster are that emerged from the responses to this question.

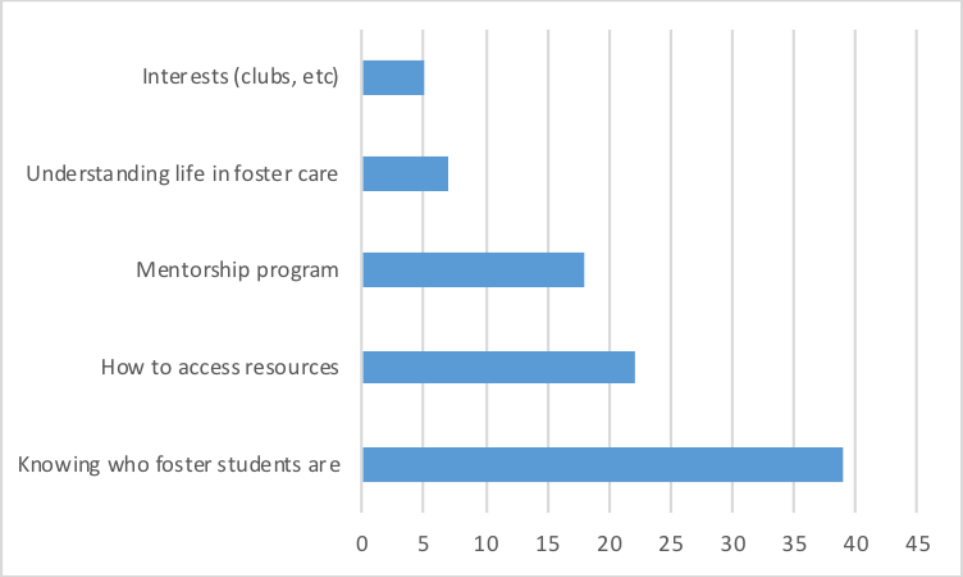

Figure 16. Staff non-mentors suggestions for way to further support foster youth

Summary

The data presented in chapter four demonstrates the opinions and impressions of major stakeholders within the life of a foster youth. Fourteen adults who were part of the foster care system while in school participated through individual interviews and shared their experiences and reflections of their time as foster youth students. Twenty current or former foster parents

participated via electronic surveys and provided their views on how schools support foster youth and where there is room for growth. Eighteen staff mentors participated in a focus group, and shared their experiences as an on-site trusted adult for students in the foster care system. Sixty-nine staff who do not currently serve as mentors completed an online survey focused on school-wide communication and support for foster youth.

The results identified three central themes, which align to the original research questions. The first theme is the importance of ensuring foster youth have access to a trusted adult on campus. All stakeholder groups shared this as a priority, with each group providing specific examples of how this relationship benefits foster youth. The second theme is the need for ongoing training for team members working with students in the foster care system. While mentors receive training through the school district and foster parents through their foster care agency, all agreed that increased and frequent training is essential to ensure all involved parties are emotionally and mentally prepared to provide the appropriate support for these students. The final theme is the need for communication across all settings to allow a community of support for the students. All stakeholders stated that the need for communication between team members included the knowledge of who foster youth on campus are, available resources, and how to access them.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results and data analysis of this study focused on the intervention of an on-site mentorship program to support the social-emotional and academic needs of foster youth, and the training necessary for mentors within this program to provide effective support. Chapter 5 presents a summary of the study, a discussion of the data analysis, implications for practices, recommendations for future research, how the theoretical framework impacts the study, motivation of the researcher, and conclusions. The results of the study show that training and preparation for the mentors is essential in both creating confidence in their abilities to reach foster youth, and in the trust these youth are asked to place in their mentors.

The purpose of this study was to determine if a mentorship program, utilizing an on-site mentor, provides significant support to meet the social-emotional and academic needs of foster youth. Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) as a theoretical framework, the study specifically focused on the potential for unmet lower level basic and psychological needs as impeding the ability to access the curriculum. The researcher further sought to determine if meeting these needs, thus allowing the foster youth to move up the pyramid, would support an increase in meeting educational goals by placing the students emotionally and academically in a state where learning can take place.

The study was conducted by asking key stakeholders how the presence of a stable adult mentor might influence the academic success of foster youth, what training and resources would be necessary to support this endeavor, and how communication would increase the overall support of foster youth. Current and former foster parents participated through surveys distributed electronically via email and social media. The questions for this group focused on their experiences interacting with the school their foster youth attend(s/ed) and their impression

of their youth's connectedness with the school. Former foster youth over the age of 18 were interviewed individually to ensure their privacy and confidentiality. These questions pertained to foster youth experiences in secondary education (defined as grades 7-12 for the purpose of this survey) and their relationships with adults on campus. They were also asked their opinions regarding a structured on-site mentor program. The researcher works within a district where this type of program has been implemented, and therefore a third group of stakeholders was existing mentors within this program. Their involvement was through a focus group facilitated by an impartial moderator and concentrated on their interactions with foster youth, the mentor training, and the mentor's level of comfort and preparation to engage with this at-risk group of students. The final group asked to participate was educators, both classified and certificated, who do not serve as mentors. They responded to an electronic survey delivered via email to determine their familiarity with foster youth on campus and resources available to support their needs.

Discussion of the Findings

The following section will focus on the conclusions based on the data provided in chapter four. These conclusions have been member checked for validity and the conclusions for each research question confirmed through this process. The findings are presented by research question with outcomes from each stakeholder group highlighted.

Question One

How does the implementation of an on-site mentor increase foster youth social-emotional development within secondary education?

Former Foster Youth

The age of the former foster youth appears to correlate to the level of connectedness and awareness of resources, as well as to access to a trusted adult. Part of this increase in recent

years may be the benefit of improved legislation aimed at closing the achievement gap of foster youth compared to their peers. The inclusion of foster youth as a significant subgroup within the LCAP demonstrates these students as a priority, and therefore more resources have been allocated to support their needs. It appears this accounts for the differences in responses between age groups of participants. However, the number of former foster youth unfamiliar with resources, especially those related to post-secondary goals such as college, financial aid, and employment, underscores the need for focused attention to disseminating this information to foster youth.

The open-ended responses of former foster youth highlight the benefit of a trusted adult on campus. While older participants did not identify a trusted adult, the younger respondents clearly indicated the importance of a safe staff member who believed in them and noticed them on campus. Their responses demonstrate the need for a sense of belonging, aligned with the lower tiers of Maslow's Hierarchy, and the presence of a trusted adult on campus helps to fulfill this need.

Foster Parents

Foster parents overwhelmingly felt their foster youth had a trusted adult on campus. Since participating foster parents had worked with a number of different school districts, this demonstrates that most schools have staff members willing to reach out and help at-risk youth. A formal mentorship program solidifies that relationship and provides training to support both staff and student. Further, a majority of foster parents reported they were unaware of resources on campus to support them, and a mentor may help bridge the gap between home and school.

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors felt very positive about the importance of a trusted adult on campus to support foster youth. As staff members currently filling this role, their input is subjective, but also relevant to the relationship established through a mentorship program. They recognized the importance of meeting lower level needs such as safety and a sense of belonging, and felt they provided an important support for the students they mentor. The program studied is in the fourth year of implementation, and most of the mentors have been involved for multiple years with plans to continue. This demonstrates the benefits for staff members, in addition to those provided for their students.

Staff Non-Mentors

A slim majority, 54%, of staff members who do not currently serve as mentors reported a familiarity with the mentorship program. This demonstrates a need for increased marketing and communication regarding this support, in order to ensure all students in need are appropriately referred. While most foster youth within the target district enroll after consultation with the Foster Youth Liaison, this is not an exclusive practice and it is important that all youth in care are recognized for additional support. Furthermore, some staff members were uncertain as to the benefit of a staff mentor, either because they did not have enough information regarding the program or because they were uncertain as to the benefits for the students. This speaks to the need for better communication within the school site(s) to ensure all staff understand the mentorship program and how to refer a student in need.

Question Two

What types of training and support are necessary for secondary school staff to effectively support the unique social-emotional needs of foster youth?

Former Foster Youth

The results from the foster youth demonstrate a significant lack of connection to school and familiarity to available resources. This gap may be filled by targeted training of mentors in areas such as school clubs and activities, electives, career technical education classes, and sports. The responses indicating a lack of knowledge of resources can be addressed through training mentors on how to ensure students are receiving free lunch, legislation affecting foster youth such as the ability to graduate with reduced credits when necessary, and what campus activities may have prices waived. For example, at the high schools in the focus district, foster youth may attend school dances, obtain a yearbook, and participate in senior activities for no charge. Ensuring mentors are aware of these resources and the steps to access them should be one focus in mentor training.

Foster Parents

Foster parents scored student familiarity with post-secondary goals such as college, financial aid, and employment significantly lower than with school activities and resources. This indicates a need for mentor training in these areas with a specific focus on resources for foster youth. In California, the Guardians Scholar program provides housing, tuition, and other on-campus resources for foster youth attending a number of junior colleges and universities throughout the state (CFYETF, 2014). To sufficiently support foster youth, mentors should be trained on these resources and how to access them.

Foster parents also felt that training focused on trauma and attachment would benefit mentors and other staff striving to support foster youth. They referred to the unique challenges faced by these students, and the importance of patience and compassion when addressing concerns. Specifically, the foster parents agree that training that targets trauma and attachment

would benefit mentors, and this is consistent with the feedback from mentors regarding the training they have found most valuable in their mentoring relationships. According to Orange County Social Services (2019), the licensing process takes approximately six months, and includes a series of classes designed to prepare foster parents for the needs of children potentially placed in their homes. However, the majority of foster parents participating in this study did not feel adequately prepared to support foster youth in their home following training to obtain licensing. Because foster youth present with individual trauma and unique challenges, it may be impossible to fully plan for any eventuality, but more training for all stakeholders would seem a worthwhile goal based on this feedback. A possible area of consideration would be training that includes both mentors and foster parents, to bridge the gap between home and school to share experiences and best practices. This would also connect foster parents to the supports available from the school for students and their foster families.

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors strongly agree that the current levels of training they receive help them support foster youth. The areas where they identified a need for further training focused on the school as a whole and the importance of educating all staff on the realities of life in the foster care system. While there has been some training in this regard for the focus district, it has been part of a larger day of staff development where participants self-selected training sessions. The focus district is geographically near the juvenile court and social services agency, and therefore has a higher than average number of group homes within its attendance catchment. With this in mind, and in light of the increased focus on foster youth through their inclusion in the LCAP, it would seem appropriate to provide this training to all staff to ensure trauma informed instruction becomes the norm.

The other area that schools should explore, based on the mentor participation in the focus group, is the development of on-site resources for food and clothing to support students in need. One site has created a food pantry but the mentors currently fund this; they suggested that further financial support from the school would allow this program to expand and reach more children, foster or not. This expansion of on-site resources would benefit foster youth as well as homeless students who qualify for McKinney-Vento or are socio-economically disadvantaged.

Staff Non-Mentors

The responses to the yes-or-no question asking if staff felt adequately prepared to support foster youth appear to contradict the free response question asking participants to share the resources with which they are familiar. While 64% (n=44) of the participants responded in the affirmative to the first question, very few were able to list available resources. Those who did listed personnel to whom they may refer to should the situation arise. This demonstrates a need for training for all staff regarding the needs of foster youth and the specific supports available to both the students and staff. Meeting the needs of these students should be the responsibility of all stakeholders, and there is concern of delay if the support consists solely of referring the student to additional individuals. Since foster youth and mentors have reported a lack of trust as a primary factor, staff need to have the necessary knowledge to provide timely and appropriate responses when a student in need requests help.

The other indication from staff non-mentors is the importance of knowing who their foster youth are. While acknowledging the need for confidentiality, withholding this information from those responsible for their care and education while on campus creates an unnecessary barrier to providing on-campus support. Based on the responses, some schools have better

communication than others, but since all school staff surveyed work within a single district, there is a clear need for systemic training on effectively sharing and protecting this information.

Question Three

According to stakeholders, how can on-site mentors improve support and communication across the secondary site teams working with foster youth?

Former Foster Youth

The first step to increasing communication among stakeholders is creating positive connections between staff and students. Without this, it becomes a challenge to identify the needs of the foster youth. The advice from former foster youth underscores this; a majority of participants indicated seeking out trusted adults as a priority for a foster youth starting a new school. Assigning an on-site mentor to a new foster youth provides the student with a safe and knowledgeable support system, which then becomes the primary on-site liaison for communication and support on campus. This mentor should also fulfil the primary suggestion offered by former foster youth: finding activities of interest on campus to create a sense of belonging. Through conversation, the mentor and student identify areas of interest and determine paths on campus to facilitate involvement in the school community. This addresses Maslow's tier focused on belonging, which continues to move the foster youth up the pyramid to a place where learning can take place.

Foster Parents

The responses from foster parents regarding ways the school can improve support of foster youth was varied and, at times, contradictory. While some foster parents felt it was important for staff to know who is foster, others felt this labeled their student and was more of a hindrance than a benefit. Overall, the feedback focused on finding ways to support foster youth

through a variety of means. This includes assigning a specific contact person on site as a central liaison, providing teachers with information and resources to support their students who are in care, and ensuring all staff understand the challenges faced by foster youth and how to respond accordingly. The frequent mention of a specific contact person underscores the importance of improving communication between the school and home, to ensure all stakeholders are working together to support the foster youth. This is a role the mentors can undertake to increase collaboration and consistency in the lives of their students.

Staff Mentors

Staff mentors shared their concerns regarding the risk factors faced by foster youth, with instability and disenfranchisement the most frequently emerging themes. This information provides mentors with the roots of a communication system. The study demonstrates the need to increase consistency and stability in the lives of foster youth whenever possible. Therefore, the importance of clear and timely communication between the various stakeholders cannot be overstated. As the trusted adult on campus assigned to a specific youth, it is incumbent upon the mentor to seek out opportunities to bring the team together and focus on stability and structure for the foster youth.

Staff Non-Mentors

Staff who do not serve as mentors expressed some frustration at not always knowing who the foster youth are on campus, and ways to access resources to support these students. This is a suggested area of growth for the existing mentorship program as communication becomes a school-wide focus instead of the mentor serving as gatekeeper to the information. While confidentiality must be prioritized, it is also imperative that all stakeholders understand the specific needs of the foster youth and work together to ensure these needs are met.

Discussion of How the Theoretical Framework Impacts the Study

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) as a theoretical framework, this study sought to determine if meeting lower level needs such as belonging would propel foster youth further up the pyramid to self-actualization where academic learning can occur. Focusing on an existing mentorship program in a district in Orange County, CA, the researcher studied the effects of ensuring students have access to a trusted adult and how this relationship fulfills lower level needs according to Maslow.

The results from all stakeholder groups clearly reflected a positive influence on foster youth when a trusted adult emotionally invests in their well-being. Former foster youth reflected on the positive relationships they had with school staff while in middle and high school, and described the individual supports they received ranging from necessary supplies to a sympathetic person to listen to their struggles. Foster parents indicated that knowing somebody on campus was watching over their foster children gave them peace of mind, because too often there is a lack of understanding in the school system as to the needs and triggers for these at-risk students. Staff mentors shared their personal experiences working with foster youth, to include the self-fulfillment they felt when their students realized social-emotional and academic successes. Staff who do not currently serve as mentors discussed the importance of ensuring all staff are informed and prepared to support foster youth, and focusing on an increase in communication among the team.

Based on the data from the study, the presence of a trusted adult on campus benefits foster youth and increases their social-emotional and academic resources. Further, these relationships support fulfilling the lower level needs as described by Maslow, which

simultaneously supports moving students further up the pyramid towards eventual self-actualization.

Implications for Practice

This study was conducted in a district that already supports a mentorship program pairing on-site staff with foster youth on secondary campuses. During the time of the research, the program was in the fourth year of implementation and supported approximately 117[1] foster youth with 33 mentors across three middle school, four high school, and two alternative education campuses (Nelson, 2019). The data from this study shows the strengths of the mentorship program, specifically the presence of a trusted adult and a stable relationship where the foster youth can turn for resources, guidance, and support. Former foster youth and mentors especially recognized the importance of this connection and the sense of belonging it provides for these at-risk students.

Moving forward, the program in the focus district should consider expanding professional development opportunities to stakeholders beyond current mentors. Foster parents and staff who do not currently serve as mentors both shared feeling unprepared to fully meet the needs of foster youth and indicated a willingness to participate in training opportunities to form connections with other support providers and to better understand the realities of the foster youth with whom they regularly interact. Specific topics suggested by stakeholders for training include adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), trauma informed education, and attachment theory. An area of need for increased training for mentors includes those areas with which former foster youth and foster parents felt disconnected or unfamiliar. These trainings should focus on college resources,

[1]The number of foster youth fluctuated between 110 and 123 during the course of this study. Due to their high residency mobility, this is an ever-changing number.

to include financial aid and the Guardian's Scholar program, employment opportunities, course selections, and on-campus activities such as clubs, dances, and sports.

Moving outward from the focus group, districts who do not currently have a program such as this in place should consider the benefit for all stakeholders. The state of California has deemed foster youth a priority subgroup by including them in the LCAP, and districts should consider ways to increase support on their campuses. The data from this study has shown that an on-site mentor provides foster youth with a stable adult who can connect them to resources, and thus fulfills their need for a sense of belonging.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was limited in geographic scope and access to participants. A consideration for future research may be working directly with foster youth over a larger geographical area to solicit feedback that may be generalized to a broader audience. The ethical considerations for direct access to foster youth prevented the researcher in this study from including them as participants, but a study capable of addressing these concerns and ensuring confidentiality and emotional safety for foster youth may generate data relevant to their specific needs.

Another area of potential research would be how systems of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) serve the needs of foster youth. The researcher for this study studied MTSS and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) within the Review of Literature, and foster youth and school systems may benefit from further research explicitly connecting these types of programs to foster youth in schools. Within MTSS, there is also a gap in research for implementing Social-Emotional Learning into general education to support all students, but specifically the lower-level needs of safety and belonging inherent in the population of foster youth in schools.

Motivation of the Researcher

The researcher for this study became interested in the topic through her own work as a foster parent. First licensed in 2007, the researcher has welcomed foster children of all ages into her home and worked with various agencies such as the public school system, social services, and the family court system to support these children while they were unable to live with their family of origin. As a high school teacher, the researcher found herself drawn to youth in the system and worked to ensure they had adequate supplies and resources to be successful on campus. Upon becoming an Assistant Principal and responsible for foster youth on campus, the researcher learned of the new on-site mentorship program to support foster and homeless youth in secondary settings and became involved in this program. Working with the District Liaison for foster and McKinney-Vento youth, the researcher participated in and led trainings, and worked directly with foster youth and their mentors. Through this study, the researcher sought to determine via data if the program was effective and relevant to the needs of foster youth.

Conclusions

This study focused on the social-emotional needs of foster youth, specifically the lower-level needs of safety and belonging, as defined in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943). Within a focus district in Orange County, California, the researcher studied an existing mentorship program that pairs staff members with foster youth. Through focus groups, interviews, and surveys with the major stakeholder groups of former foster youth, current and former foster parents, staff mentors, and staff who do not serve as mentors on a site with the mentorship program, the researcher sought to determine how the presence of an on-site trusted adult affected the foster youth experiences while in secondary school (grades seven through twelve). The

researcher further sought to identify strengths and needs in training for mentors' communication among the foster youth teams.

The data from all stakeholder groups shows that foster youth benefit from the implementation of this type of program as the presence of a stable and trusted adult positively influenced their secondary school experiences. Participants also shared that access to resources and school connectedness were areas where mentors may help foster youth become part of the school community, which addresses the need for a sense of belonging. Participants also felt that increased training for all staff mentors, general site staff, and foster parents would better support adults involved in the foster youth's lives. This training should focus on access to resources, trauma informed interventions, and attachment. A final area of focus identified through the study is the sharing of information throughout the teams, both on-site and off-site. Specifically, staff members felt they would benefit from knowing who the foster youth on campus are, and foster parents felt a consolidated point of contact on campus would ease communication and access to resources.

The needs and struggles of foster youth are staggering, and the researcher hopes to find avenues to close the social-emotional and academic gaps between foster youth and their peers. This study represents a small portion of that journey, and it is the sincere hope of the researcher that an increased focus on these students results in stronger programs to support their needs.

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APPENDIX A

Former Foster Youth Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself with your first name, and current age.
2. What is the last year and grade you attended high school?
3. What was the end result of your high school experience?
   - Graduated with full credits
   - Graduated with a waiver/reduced credits
   - GED
   - Adult education
   - Did not complete high school or the equivalent
4. How connected did you feel to your school?
5. Were you aware of resources available on campus to help you as a foster youth?
6. Did you feel there was a trusted adult, on campus, to help you while you were at school?
7. How informed did you feel regarding each of the following? (Completely Informed, Mostly Informed, Neutral, Somewhat Informed, Not at All Informed)
   a. College
   b. Financial Aid
   c. Employment
   d. School Activities
   e. School supports and resources
8. If you had a trusted adult on campus, how did they help you with your school experience?

9. Do you feel current foster youth would benefit from an assigned staff mentor? Why or why not?
10. What advice would you give a new foster youth starting school tomorrow?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX B

Survey Questions for Current and Former Foster Parents

1. What is your gender?
2. What is your age?
3. How many years were you involved in the foster care system?
4. What is your current level of involvement as a foster parent?

   Active – with placement Active – without placement

   Inactive – temporarily Inactive – permanently

Please answer the following questions based on your experiences as a foster parent to youth in middle and high school.

How connected did you feel to your students' school?

5. Were/are you aware of resources on campus to help you, as a foster parent?
6. Did you feel there was a trusted adult, on campus, to help your student while they were at school?
7. Do you feel your foster parent trainings prepared you for your role as a foster parent?
8. To the best of your knowledge, how informed was your foster student regarding each of the following? (Completely Informed, Mostly Informed, Neutral, Somewhat Informed, Not at All Informed)

   a. College

   b. Financial Aid

   c. Employment

   d. School Activities

   e. School supports and resources

Please answer the following questions based on your own experiences.

9. Do you feel an assigned on-site staff mentor would benefit foster students? Why or why not?
10. What specific challenges did you face caring for a student involved with foster care?
11. How can the school improve its support of foster youth?
12. What types of training would be essential for staff mentors who aim to support the unique needs of foster youth?

Other comments

APPENDIX C

Mentor Focus Group Questions

1. Please go around the circle and introduce yourself with your first name.
2. How long have you been a foster mentor?
3. How many students are on your case load?
4. *hand out a chart of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and explain that the theory proposes that higher level needs cannot be addressed until lower level needs are met*
5. Based on this chart, what are the implications for foster youth?
6. What can be done to address these implications?
7. What are the risk factors for foster youth when considering lower and higher level needs?
8. Are there things the school can and/or should be doing to meet these needs and help students move up the pyramid? If so, what are they?
9. Please talk about your relationship with the student you mentor.
    a. How often do you meet with them?
    b. What types of things do you discuss?
    c. Do you feel they are receptive to your involvement?
10. Has the training prepared you to effectively mentor foster youth? Why or why not?
11. What advice would you give a new foster youth starting school here tomorrow?
12. What advice would you give a new staff mentor?
13. Is there anything else you would like to share?

APPENDIX D

Survey Questions for Staff Who Do Not Currently Serve as Mentors

1. What is your role in education? Please circle one: Classified Certificated Administrator
2. How long have you worked in education?
3. What grade(s) do you currently teach or have you taught in the past? If you are classified or administration, please indicate the grades you interact with most frequently. Please select all that apply. 7 8 9 10 11 12

   Please answer the following questions based on your experiences as a middle and/or high school staff member.

4. Do you know who the foster youth are on your campus (classified and administration) or in your classes (certificated)?
5. Do you feel adequately prepared to support the unique needs of foster youth, should they come to you for help?
6. As a school site, do you feel that your school has systems in place to support foster youth?
7. Are you familiar with the site mentorship program?
8. Do you feel you receive sufficient training to support the unique needs of foster youth?

   Please answer the following questions based on your own experiences.

9. Do you feel an assigned on-site staff mentor benefits foster students? Why or why not?
10. What resources are available to you, as a staff member, to support foster youth?
11. How can the school improve its support of foster youth?
12. Other comments

APPENDIX E

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that **Keri Kimes Davis** successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants."

Date of Completion: 10/18/2017

Certification Number: 1331626

NIH National Institutes of Health
Office of Extramural Research