EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES AND OBSTACLES FOR

CHILDREN AND YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE IN HAWAIʻI

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ABSTRACT

Current research shows that students in foster care face numerous obstacles to educational success. Some educationally resilient students nonetheless exceed expectations in terms of academic achievement. This study examined the educational experiences of students in foster care in Hawaiʻi and the role played by key adult supporters and advocates. The study also explored the themes that emerge from the participants narratives of educational success and resilience.

This qualitative case study was based on interviews with eight educationally resilient young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, who attended elementary, middle or high school while in foster care. The semi-structured, narrative interviews invited participants to tell their stories and ascribe meaning to events according to their own perspectives. In keeping with the qualitative design of the study, patterns and themes were allowed to emerge organically from the data.

Findings suggest that even educationally resilient students in foster care experienced academic and behavioral fluctuations at school and that periods of difficulty at school tended to correlate with disruptions the students faced in relation to their foster care status. School placement changes had a negative impact, both academically and socio-emotionally, on the participants. Conversely, maintaining a preferred school placement was a key element in the educational success narratives of several of the participants.

While supportive adults played an important role in the educational success of all the participants, most of the participants did not identify classroom teachers as key supporters. The findings suggest that lack of knowledge and information may have limited the capacity of

teachers as advocates and supporters. The findings also show that the participants' narratives

contained certain common themes, including positivity, agency, goal setting, and resilient

reintegration.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Education is a critical factor in the lives of children and youth in foster care. However, students in foster care face a variety of internal and external challenges to educational success and achievement. Their arrival in foster care results from the inability of their birth parents to provide a safe and supportive home. For many, their past is marked by trauma and exposure to instability, poverty, substance abuse, and violence. While the details of their stories may differ, they invariably influence the way students in foster care learn and interact with the educational system.

Large numbers of former foster students tell a bleak story about their experiences in school. When students in foster care face adversity, there is often a corresponding downward spiral in their educational performance. The educational narratives for these students are characterized by obstacles and deficits: failing grades, learning disabilities, disciplinary problems, and diminishing expectations. The instability present in the lives of many of them is magnified and mirrored by frequent school placement changes. These students often wind up isolated and unchampioned: poorly understood by teachers and school administrators, unconnected to educational support systems, and disengaged from a culture of academic achievement and success. Too many of these stories end with a youth "aging out" of the system without a high school diploma, academically unprepared to pursue further schooling, and facing the limited prospects available to a non-high school graduate.

However, some children and youth in foster care thrive despite the challenges they face. Success stories told by young adults who spent time in foster care almost invariably include a chapter detailing the important role of education. These stories may revolve around the support

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and concern of a particular teacher, counselor, or coach. In other cases, they are narratives of zealous advocacy by a foster parent, social worker, or guardian ad litem (GAL) who believed in the student's educational potential. These stories are testaments to the resilience of students in foster care and they have much to teach us about how to support these students.

Need for the Study

The current study sought to address a gap in the current research by examining the educational experiences of students in foster care within the specific context of Hawaiʻi. Hawaiʻi is structurally distinct in that both the child welfare system and the department of education are unitary agencies with administrative responsibilities that encompass the entire state, and that serve populations distributed over different islands.

The vast majority of current research on students in foster care uses quantitative data to draw correlations between specific characteristics and experiences, like having a learning disability or experiencing school placement instability, and educational outcomes, like lower grades or dropping out of high school (Blome, 1997; Courtney et al., 2005). While this research is important, it also tells an incomplete story of the experiences of students in foster care. Some research has taken a different approach by drawing on the words and stories of students in foster care themselves (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002; Hochman, Hochman, & Miller, 2004; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar, & Trinkle, 2010). However, there is a need for more qualitative inquiry into the educational experiences of students in foster care. "[M]any prior studies tend to generalize the foster care experience. Every child is different, with a unique background, and statistics rarely delineate these differences" (Finkelstein et al., 2002). This study seeks, by

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exploring the perspectives and lived experiences of students in foster care, to add to the depth of understanding of their experiences.

A study emphasizing narrative in both objective and method is also important because of the way the lives of children and youth in foster care are intertwined with the legal system. Court proceedings tend to constrain the stories of participants and this is particularly true for marginalized groups. Critical legal studies scholars have argued that attention to narrative creates space for previously excluded voices. Delgado saw stories as a tool for racial justice. He argued that stories "emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us together" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440). The importance of narrative has been recognized in relation to the rights other marginalized groups including women, the poor, the LGBTQ community, people with disabilities, immigrants, Native Hawaiians, and other indigenous peoples. (Abrams, 1991; Alfieri, 1991; Fajer, 1992; Iijima, 2000; Jurss, 2017; Rovner, 2001; Valencia-Weber & Lopes, 2010). Children and youth in foster care are often situated at the intersection of more than one of these marginalized and silenced identities.

Students in foster care are additionally vulnerable to having their stories silenced or ignored because the family court assumes a quasi parental role. Yet, as Bandes (1996) argues, the expression of emotions such as caring, empathy, and compassion are often excluded or unheard by the court. Children and youth in foster care are completely reliant on representatives of the legal system to act on their behalf, yet even advocates seeking to advance a client's best interests are prone to subordinate the stories of their clients "when lawyer narratives silence and displace client narratives" (Alfieri, 1991).

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Emphasizing narratives promises to do more than just invite excluded voices into the discussion; by recognizing the power of stories to shape both society and self, we also invite in a different way of knowing. Matsuda (1987) suggests that "looking to the bottom," that is elevating the stories and perspective of the most marginalized, offers a distinct epistemological approach that informs the task of "defining the elements of justice" (p. 324). To do otherwise risks perpetuating the marginalization of the study participants and the broader population they represent, because, as Minnow (1990) observes, "further injury and helplessness arise when we lack words to give meaning to our experience" (p. 1673).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine in depth the educational experiences of students in foster care in Hawaiʻi. The intent was to bring to the forefront the voices of former foster youth in order to illuminate their perspectives on their own educational experiences. While the current literature paints a clear, if daunting, picture of the challenges children and youth in foster care face at school, and their generally poor educational outcomes, it does little to provide insight into the way students in foster care interpret and assign meaning to their own educational stories. The literature helps to demonstrate what is happening, but does less to explain, from the point of view of the foster youth themselves, how and why it is happening.

I also hoped that the study could reveal how students in foster care perceived the contributions of the various adults with some stake in their educational progress. Students tend to perform best at school when their families are actively engaged with their education. For students in foster care, responsibility for educational decision-making is distributed among multiple adult actors with uncertain levels of knowledge, capacity, and commitment. I hoped to

learn more about how the enthusiasm and effectiveness, or lack thereof, with which these actors played their roles as advocates and supporters impacted the educational success and resilience of students in foster care.

What I did not fully anticipate, but became clear as my research progressed, was that this study was also a story about storytelling. As I conducted the interviews with the participants, I was struck over and over by the eloquence and impact of the stories I was hearing. The challenges faced by these youth were harrowing; some of the tragedies they had withstood, heartbreaking. The magnitude of the adversity they faced only served to color their successes more triumphant. These were not just recitations of facts and events, but narrative constructs that helped to define how the participants saw themselves. This revelation led inexorably to an evolution of the questions that I had originally believed I was asking with my research. It seemed that the narrative themes evident in the stories of the participants might do more than provide a window into the educational experiences of students in foster care and the resilience that had allowed these youth to thrive. Perhaps the narratives themselves, and the process through which the participants had developed them, contributed to the participants' resilience. Perhaps the repetition and internalization of the stories the participants told about their own power and resilience have helped to shape their educational experiences; possibly even to improve their educational outcomes.

The findings of this research were organized around the themes that arose in response to the research questions. The findings were presented in this way primarily to preserve the anonymity of the participants. The findings explore the experiences of the participants as a single case, rather than multiple cases with the individual narratives of the participants presented.

Research Questions

I ultimately determined that there were three central questions that this research strove to answer.

1. How do young adults who were in foster care during their childhood and youth characterize their K-12 school experience? What obstacles to academic success did they face?

2. Which adult actors do these young adults believe had the greatest influence on their school experiences? What aspects of these relationships proved more or less supportive of academic success?

3. How do the narrative characteristics and themes that arise in the educational stories of academically successful students in foster care reflect and reinforce their educational success and resilience?

Chapter 2: Review of Current Literature

There is no good way to enter foster care. Some children enter foster care because of the death of a parent or caregiver. In addition, Hawaiʻi law provides that the family court has jurisdiction when it is determined that a child has been harmed, threatened with harm, or is in imminent risk of harm from their own family or caregiver (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. §587A). In practical terms this means that the children and youth who enter foster care have often been physically or emotionally abused or neglected, sexually abused, or exposed to domestic violence, drug and alcohol addiction, or other illegal and unsafe behavior in their homes. "Thus, virtually every child who is removed from his or her family or legal guardian, and then placed into the foster care system has experienced some level of trauma within the home." (Vandervort, Henry, & Sloane, 2012).

On top of experiencing bereavement, or unsafe or abusive conditions with their birth families, children and youth entering foster care undergo physical and emotional disruptions when they enter care. Entering care can mean moving into an unfamiliar home, separation from siblings and other relatives, and learning new routines and expectations. Although a child's birth parents may have been unable to protect her or him from harm, even when a birth parent was an abuser, the child's life is nonetheless further disrupted by the separation from birth parents and siblings. In many cases, children and youth in foster care also struggle with feelings of rejection, responsibility, and guilt. Taken together, the experiences of children and youth in foster care can have a profound impact on their educational achievement (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017).

The trauma experienced by the majority of children and youth in foster care can have negative impacts on brain development leading to learning and language delays (Perry, Pollard, Blakely, Baker, & Vigilante, 1995). Changes in the brain resulting from neglect can impact sensory, emotional, cognitive, and social development (De Bellis, 2005). Neglected and abused children and youth are more likely to commit violent or criminal acts as adults (Bender, Postlewait, Thompson, & Springer, 2005). However, research also shows that the negative impacts of trauma on brain development can be ameliorated or even reversed by early interventions that support positive experiences, connections, and socio-emotional development. In many ways, the recommended approach for addressing the impact of childhood trauma on brain development dovetails with the factors that promoting resilience (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2017). Principal among these is developing and maintaining relationships with adult supporters.

To contextualize the educational experiences of the young adults whose stories compose the heart of this study, it is first necessary to understand what current research tells us about the educational experiences and outcomes of students in foster care. As a group, the participants in this study have achieved considerable educational success relative to the majority of children and youth in foster care. Therefore, literature exploring the concept of resilience, and especially the role played by a consistent, caring adult in the lives of resilient youth is also highly relevant.

Academic Performance Measures

Students in foster care tend to be less academically successful than their non-foster peers. Close to 50% of children entering kindergarten while in foster care exhibit far less phonological awareness (a key pre-reading predictor) than their non-foster peers and are at risk for later reading difficulties (Pears, Hetwood, Kim, & Fisher, 2011). Students in foster care have been found to receive lower grades and test scores than their non-foster peers. In one of the first studies to compare educational outcomes for a sample of foster youth to the outcomes of a control group composed of non-foster students, Blome (1997) found that the foster students reported lower scores (mostly C grades) than the control group (mostly Bs and Cs). A Washington State study involving several thousand students found that only half as many of the students in foster care (23%) maintained grades that consisted mostly of As and Bs as compared to their peers not in foster care (46%) (Burley & Halpern, 2001). A study of middle school age students in foster care found that their GPAs were collectively equivalent to a D+ and that only two out of 25 students in the study maintained a GPA of B or better. It is worth noting that many of the participants in the study were unaware of their actual academic performance; many also exhibited relatively low expectations for their own academic performance, considering a passing grade to be an indicator of good performance (Finkelstein et al., 2002). This finding suggests that self-reported accounts of academic achievement by students in foster care may not reliably represent actual achievement.

Another indicator of academic success by which students in foster care tend to lag behind is enrollment in advanced placement and college preparatory courses. One study found that only 41% of 11th grade students in foster care had taken advanced classes such as chemistry, physics, calculus, AP classes, and foreign languages, compared to 58% of students not in foster care

(Burley & Halpern, 2001). Furthermore, when a group of high school students in foster care were compared with a group of students not in foster care with matched scores on standardized math and reading inventories, the foster youth group was significantly more likely to be in a lower academic track than the non-foster group; the study found that while 32% of the comparison group enrolled in college preparatory courses, only 15% of the participants in the foster student group were enrolled in similar courses (Blome, 1997). This suggests that the preconceptions of school personnel or the lack of advocacy by caregivers may contribute to the exclusion of students in foster care from advanced academic opportunities.

Children and youth in foster care are more likely than their non-foster peers to be retained in a grade level. A survey of over a thousand former foster youth found that 36.2% had repeated a grade during their time in school (Pecora et al., 2003). In a survey of foster youth in New York, 44% reported being retained at least once. In the same study, 80% of the GALs and 63% of the social workers surveyed reported that between 25% and 75 % of their clients were retained while in foster care (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000). Burley and Halpern (2001) found that 15% of Washington State 11th grade students in foster care report being retained at least once, compared to only eight percent of students not in foster care.

Studies have also looked at whether a student in foster care is more likely to be retained in a given year. In the Chicago public schools, nine percent of students in foster care were retained in a given year, compared to five percent of the population of students not in foster care (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, George, & Courtney, 2004). A study by the School District of Broward County, Florida (2003) found that more than 20% of a sample group of children and youth in foster care were retained during a school year, compared to only seven percent of the total student population. As a result of the combined effect of starting school late and high

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retention rates, Smithgall et al. (2004) find that six to nine percent of 10 to 14 year old students in foster care in the Chicago public schools were two or more grade levels behind same aged non-foster peers.

Graduation Rates

Numerous studies have shown that children and youth in foster care are less likely than their peers to graduate from high school (Pecora et al., 2003). A study of graduation rates in Washington State found that over a five-year period, graduation rates for youth in foster care lagged more than 30% behind graduation rates for all students (Burley, 2010). A large study in the Midwestern states found that at age 19, 37.1% of current and former foster youth surveyed had neither completed high school nor completed a General Educational Development (GED) program (Courtney et al., 2005). Burley and Halpern (2001) found that only 59% of eleventh graders who were in foster care enrolled in twelfth grade and completed high school the following year; this is compared to 86% of eleventh grade students not in foster care. Blome (1997) found that 37% of the foster youth studied dropped out of school, compared to 16% of the non-foster students. Furthermore, as Smithgall et al. (2004) point out, as a result of dropout rates, incarceration rates, and retention, "only one-fifth of the 13-year-olds in care and slightly more than 30 percent of the 14-year-olds in care in September 1998 had graduated five years later" (p. 28). Even when students in foster care do complete high school, Pecora et al. (2006) found that a disproportional number of them complete high school via a GED. The same study also found that only 2.7% of the study participants completed a Bachelor's or higher degree. Another large-scale study of former foster youth at age 26 found that only 8% had a post secondary degree from a 2-year or 4-year institution (Courtney et al., 2011).

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Special Education

Research has shown that a high percentage of students in foster care are identified for and receive special education services. While the percentages vary between states and districts, the broad picture shows higher rates of special education participation as compared to the non-foster population. A New York study found that 30% of foster youth surveyed reported receiving special education services at some point, a number that the study's authors postulate may significantly underestimate the actual number of foster youth receiving special education services (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000). A Florida study found that while 13.8% of the school district's overall student population received special education services during a given year, 45.9% of students in foster care received such services (Office of the Superintendent, School Board of Broward County, Florida, 2003). A longitudinal study of urban and rural schools found that while 13% of the general students population receive special education services, between 25-52% of students in foster care receive such services (Lee & Johnson-Reid, 2009). Smithgall et al. (2004) also found that the percentage of children and youth in foster care receiving special education services was much higher than for the non-foster student population. In first grade, 19% of students in foster care were receiving services, compared with seven percent of the non-foster student population. This disparity was found to balloon with the increasing age of the students. By seventh and eighth grade, 45% of students in foster care were receiving special education services compared to 14% for the non-foster student population (Smithgall et al., 2004).

There are several factors that may contribute to the high percentage of students in foster care who are identified as eligible for special education services. In some cases, the conditions and events that can result in a child entering foster care can also increase the likelihood that she

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or he will have a physical, behavioral, or learning disability. Many foster children face health risks associated with parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, or maternal substance abuse (Gerber & Dicker, 2005). Children and youth in foster care may also be subjected to or witness violence in the form of child abuse and domestic abuse. Exposure to violence at an early age has been linked to developmental delays and learning disabilities (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012).

Some research suggests that foster children and youth may be both over-identified and under-identified as eligible for special education (Advocate for Children of New York, 2000). Over-identification may occur because discontinuity in schooling, emotional withdrawal, and worry about out-of-school circumstances and events may manifest as engagement or learning challenges. As one student in foster care explained, "You have to worry about where your parents are and what they're doing. And you have to worry about your schoolwork at the same time. It is hard" (Finkelstein et al., 2002, p.18). Conversely, some children and youth in foster care who genuinely need special education services may fail to be identified due to circumstances related to their foster status. Changes of school placement may interfere with the assessment and testing process that is a precursor to receiving special education services (Smithgall, Gladden, Yang, & Goerge, 2005). Highly mobile students are "often not evaluated for or do not access special school services such as 504 plans, special education programs, or gifted and talented programs" (Espana & Fried, 2004, p.85). In this way, school placement instability can interfere with students in foster care receiving appropriate special education services, which may include counseling and other mental health services.

In addition to their overrepresentation among all special education students, children and youth in foster care are also more likely to be classified as emotionally disturbed (ED). A study

that involved a review of the special educational records of 471 students in a large urban school district, found that the students with child welfare contact had a higher rate of ED diagnosis, even when controlling for low-income status. (Lee & Johnson-Reid, 2009). Smithgall et al. (2004) found that this phenomenon is evident even in first grade, when 3% of children in foster care are classified ED, compared with fewer than 0.5% of their non-foster peers. This disparity increases with age; while only 1% of non-foster public school seventh-graders were classified ED, 21% of eighth-graders in foster care were so classified. Trauma and exposure to violence undoubtedly contribute to higher rates of ED among students in foster care. It is also possible that students' frustration and anger may present as a conduct disorder. Difficulty communicating and collaborating across the educational and child welfare systems may also influence diagnosis and responses at the school level (Lee & Johnson-Reid, 2009).

Extracurricular Activities

Over time, perspectives on the impact of involvement in extracurricular activities on student achievement and well-being have evolved. Coleman (1961) argued that time and energy devoted to extracurricular activities resulted in a diminished focus on academics. Subsequent researchers have argued that participation in extracurricular activities can have an indirect positive impact on academics by developing life skills and building social capital, but that the effect may vary based on the type of activity, the age of the student, and the students' socioeconomic background (Broh, 2002). Furthermore, the positive effects may level off or even decline if excessive participation leaves too little time for academic pursuits (Fredricks, 2012).

For students in foster care, the beneficial impact of participation in extracurricular activities may be magnified if it allows them to build social capital, enhance their sense of

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mastery and efficacy, and connect with adult supporters (Vandervort, Henry, & Sloane, 2012).

Lewis (2004) argued that participation in extracurricular activities promote resilience by creating

opportunities for achievement and connection. However, school placement instability, among

other factors, can interfere with a student in foster care's opportunity to participate in

extracurricular activities (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). The state of Hawai'i has passed legislation

recognizing the right of students in foster care to participate in extracurricular activities and to

encouraging foster parents to support participation. (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. §

587A-3(11))

Behavior Issues and School Discipline

Research shows that foster status is correlated with an increased probability that a

student's behavior will result in disciplinary action by the school. Students in foster care have

been found to be twice as likely to be involved in a disciplinary incident as their non-foster peers

(Smithgall et al., 2005). A study of 262 high school students in a suburban Midwestern city

found very high rates of behavior issues at school. The study found that 29% of the participants

reported engaging in a physical fight with another student (McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, &

Thompson, 2003). Foster status is also linked to a higher rate of suspensions. McMillen et al.

(2003) found that 73% of students in foster care who were participating in independent-living

classes had been suspended at least once since seventh grade and 16% had been expelled.

Finkelstein et al. (2002) found that roughly half of the students in foster care interviewed

reported infractions at school such as disrupting class and disobeying the teacher. Children and

youth in foster care are also more likely than students not in foster care to be disciplined for an

incident involving violence (Smithgall et al., 2005). Given the disparate response to similar

incidents, this finding suggests that stereotypes about students in foster care or lack of parental advocacy may contribute to higher rates of suspension and expulsion.

School Placement Instability

School placement instability is widely recognized as a particular problem for students in foster care. Studies show that students in foster care are likely to experience more school placement changes than their non-foster peers, largely as a result of residential placement changes. Smithgall et al. (2004) found that 83% of students who had only one foster care placement during the academic year attended one school throughout the year, while only 25-35% of students who changed foster placements three or more times attended only one school. Advocates for Children of New York (2000) found that over 75% of the foster students reported that they changed schools upon entering foster care. In addition, 65% reported that a school placement change had occurred during the course of the academic year. Overall, many students in foster care experience high levels of instability in terms of school placement. Pecora et al. (2003) found that over two-thirds of students in foster care had attended three or more elementary schools, while nearly one-third had attended five or more elementary schools.

School placement instability can impact both academic achievement and behavior issues at school. A study examining five years of achievement data for students in 3rd through 8th grade, found that students who were homeless or highly mobile "underperformed more stably housed peers in reading and math achievement over time. Gaps appeared and persisted for the [homeless and highly mobile] group even when compared to low-income peers (Cutuli et al., 2012). This contrasts with the findings of Sullivan, Jones, and Mathiesen (2009) who conducted retrospective interviews with youth regarding their experiences in foster care. The youth reported an average

of more than eight school placement changes over an average of just over six and a half years in care. No significant correlation was found between the number of school changes and academic performance. However, a correlation was found between the increased behavior problems relative to foster youth with fewer school changes.

Research shows that multiple school changes and prolonged school placement instability can have a severe negative impact on student educational achievement. "Students experiencing numerous moves fall further behind their stable counterparts as their education progresses. The gap is approximately one full year of growth by the sixth year for those students who change schools four or more times" (Kerbow, 1996, p.20). A review of multiple studies shows a strong correlation between school placement instability and higher dropout rates (Rumberger, 2003).

Rumberger (2003) suggests that the impact of school placement changes on academic success and wellbeing depends on the nature and frequency of the changes. A single school change may have a negligible, or even beneficial impact on student performance. Based on analysis of several studies of student mobility, Rumberger observed that "some students made 'strategic' school moves to improve their educational prospects, while other students made 'reactive' school moves to get out of poor or dangerous situations" (Rumberger, 2003, p.14). The strategic moves were more likely to have a neutral or positive impact on educational success, while the reactive moves were more likely to have a negative impact. The majority of school placement changes by foster students, dictated by changes in foster placement and geography, more closely resemble Rumberger's definition of reactive rather than strategic school moves.

Students who transfer between schools, especially if the change occurs during the school year, may experience curricular incoherence: that is, missing the introduction of some concepts

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while unnecessarily relearning others (Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999). Curricular incoherence can affect performance in a particular class; its consequences may also grow over time as the student progresses through the grades and is required to build on previous knowledge. "Children who change schools often may miss key educational material, thereby lowering their school performance" (Zeitlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 919). The impact can be particularly acute in mathematics, in which knowledge and skills tend to build on each other in a linear progression (Kerbow, 1996).

Another consequence of school placement instability is that students in foster care may have difficulty identifying and connecting with academic and other resources and services available at the new school. The students and their caregivers are less likely to be familiar with resources at the new school. In many cases, services and resources may depend on teachers or other school personnel to recommend or refer a student. Students in foster care who make frequent school placement changes may be at a disadvantage in terms of access to these resources. "Residential mobility may undermine children's relationships with teachers and peers. Teachers are less likely to invest in children they do not know well, and the children attending a new school may feel socially isolated or marginalized" (Zeitlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 919). Students receiving special education services can experience interruptions and discontinuity of services, either because of a delay in putting services in place at the new school, or because the services available at the new school differ from those at the school of origin. School placement instability can also impact a foster student's ability to participate in extracurricular activities and team sports (Espana & Fried, 2004).

Certain concomitant consequences of school placement instability commonly impact students in foster care. These include delays in registering at the new school and, especially for

older students in foster care, lost course credit. These phenomena are more likely to occur as school placement instability increases and are also likely to increase the negative consequences of school placement instability. Registration delays for students in foster care can occur for a variety of reasons, including incomplete residency or immunization documentation, delays in transferring records from the previous school, and misunderstanding or lack of co-ordination among foster parents, social workers, and school personnel about who has the authority to register the student at a new school. Advocates for Children of New York (2000) found that more than 40% of students in foster care reported experiencing delays in registering for school. In a study of students in foster care in Pennsylvania, 56% of foster care providers reported at least some of the foster youth they worked with experienced registration delays of five days or more. In the same study, 26% reported delays in excess of two weeks (Powers & Stotland, 2002).

Students in foster care can also lose credits during the school transfer process, especially when school placement changes occur during the academic year. This can occur due to lost records, missed school time, or mismatched course offerings at the receiving school and school of origin. "I switched school. They had lost all my credits. I went back to my old school to see what happened, and they had faxed my credits to the wrong school. It took two weeks to enroll in school" (Burrell, 2003, p.4). In some cases, lost credits may exacerbate the risk of retention in grade or delayed graduation.

School placement changes also carry social and emotional consequences. Children and youth in foster care, who have already experienced trauma and instability in their lives, may be particularly vulnerable to these negative repercussions (Pecora et al., 2003). It may be difficult for students in foster care to open up to new people about their circumstances. This makes it more difficult to make friends and to form connections with school personnel. "Foster children

complain about missing school friends and teachers, as well as the difficulty of constantly adjusting to new teachers, classes and friends" (Espana & Fried, 2004, p.85). The social and emotional impact of school changes can, in turn, have an impact on academic success. In most cases, children and youth in foster care receive little or no support for the emotional challenges attendant to school placement instability (Smithgall et al., 2004).

Resilience

One way to view the educational stories of the young adults in this study is through the lens of resilience theory. Research on resilience explores the phenomena of individuals who, despite having faced extreme hardship and adversity, nonetheless developed into competent, successful adults who "worked well, played well, loved well, and expected well" (Werner & Smith, 1989, p.153). Rather than focusing on risk factors and deficits, research on resilience emphasizes protective factors and the attributes that promote a self-righting tendency that enables youth to respond positively to challenges (Werner & Smith, 1989). "Resilience refers to a class of phenomenon characterized by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development" (Masten, 2001, p.228).

Resilience must be understood as a relationship between two related constructs: the intensity and persistence of the adversity experienced and the breadth, depth, and durability of the positive adaptation (Luthar, 2006). A resilient individual is one who has withstood and adapted more positively than would have been expected given the severity of the adversity she or he has faced. In the context of education, Martin and Marsh (2009) make the distinction between educational buoyancy and educational resilience. Educational buoyancy describes positive educational outcomes in response to the normal setbacks of life. Educational resilience refers to

the characteristics and processes of those who achieve positive educational outcomes despite facing adversities that go beyond the predictable challenges of everyday life (Martin & Marsh, 2009).

A variety of protective factors correlate with a child's resilient response to adversity. These factors are found within an individual's family, within her or his larger community, and within the individual herself or himself. (Garmezy, 1993; Rutter, 1987). In the seminal Kauai Longitudinal Study, Werner and Smith (1977, 1989) collected data on nearly 700 children born the same year in Hawai'i, on the island of Kauai. The study followed the lives of the children from birth, through childhood and adolescence, and into adulthood. A number of these children faced serious challenges resulting from physical and mental health issues, poverty, and family instability; yet some continued to thrive despite these obstacles. The study found that the children and youth with strong connections to the adults in their lives, including parents, family members, and members of the community including teachers, tended to demonstrate a more resilient response to adversity. Furthermore, the children and adolescents who were good-natured, autonomous, had a positive self-image, good communication skills, a positive social orientation, and a desire to improve themselves showed more resilient outcomes. The study also found a correlation between resilience and positive attitudes toward school. "An overwhelming majority of the resilient youth, but only a minority of the youth with serious coping problems in adolescence, expressed a positive attitude toward their school experience" (Werner & Smith, 1989, p.100).

Researchers initially viewed resilience as a set of static, permanent characteristics: an armor-like invulnerability that insulated youth from the worst consequences of adversity. More recently, however, resilience has been conceptualized as a dynamic, ongoing process of

interaction with life events (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001). In this model,

resilient qualities are acquired and enhanced through an ongoing process of disruption and

reintegration. (Figure 1) Adverse conditions or events cause disruption and push the individual

out of biopsychospiritual homeostasis. Individuals respond to disruption by reintegrating back to

homeostasis, to a state of dysfunction or loss, or to resilient reintegration. "Resilient reintegration

refers to the reintegrative or coping process that results in growth, knowledge, self-

understanding, and increased strength of resilient qualities" (Richardson, 2002, p.310).
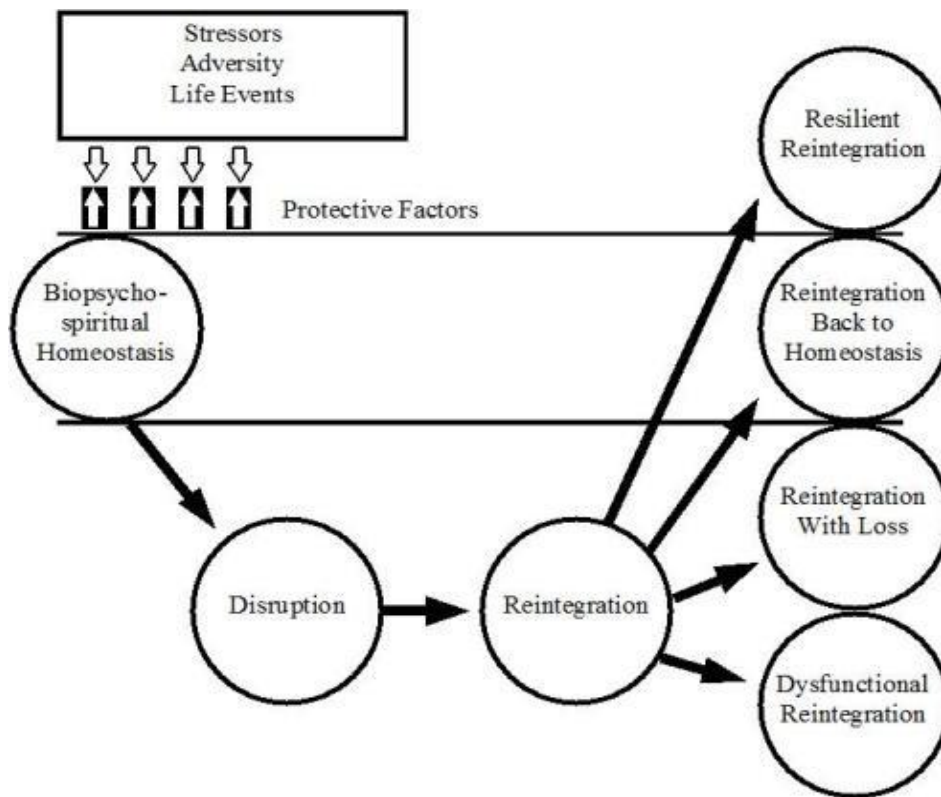
Figure 1: Resiliency Model.

Reprinted with permission from Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency, by G. E. Richardson,

2002, Journal of Clinical Psychology, 58(3), 311.

Educational Resilience

Early research looked at resilience as a single phenomenon with manifestations across different aspects of an individual's life. More recently, researchers have observed that good outcomes in one aspect of a child or youth's life do not necessarily imply resilience in all spheres. This has led to research that examines resilience in the context of specific domains, including educational resilience (Masten, 2006).

Understood most broadly, educational resilience describes the characteristics or responses of children and youth whose educational success and achievement exceed expectations despite facing challenges and adversity (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). These students "sustain high levels of achievement, motivation, and performance despite the presence of stressful events and conditions that place them at risk of doing poorly in school and ultimately dropping out of school" (Alva, 1991, p. 19). The relationship between academic performance and resilience is multifaceted. Competence has been defined in terms of academic performance including school grades and measures of classroom behavior (Garmezy, Masten, & Tellegen, 1984). Catterall used three variables to examine educational resilience: academic performance, commitment to school, and dropout behavior (1998). Resilience has been defined by reference to good academic performance and positive connections to teachers and classmates (Wyman et al., 1999). Martin and March used a construct to analyze academic resilience that consisted of five components: confidence, planning, control, composure, and persistence (2006). Factors that promote resilience are interrelated and tend to amplify each other (Masten, 2001). Educational resilience also has a self-reinforcing effect, contributing to positive life outcomes in other spheres including

social emotional growth and occupational outcomes, which can in turn build social capital and promote resilient reintegration when facing adversity (Martin & Marsh, 2006).

Adult Supporters

It is widely accepted that the presence of a consistent, caring adult is a crucial factor in promoting resilience across all domains. Numerous studies have shown that the resilience of children and youth facing adversity is enhanced by the presence of at least one caring adult in their lives (Masten, 2001; Rutter, 1999; Werner & Smith, 1992). The importance of this factor is likely to be heightened in relation to the educational resilience of students in foster care. This is true because the presence of key adult supporters may help to ameliorate the negative impact of the likely absence of birth parents in this role. Furthermore, the legal status of children and youth in foster care dictates that they are reliant on adult actors other than birth parents to provide essential support for education: providing resources, navigating bureaucracy, communicating with other stakeholders, and setting expectations.

A strong positive connection to at least one parent is a key predictor of resilience. (Werner, 1989). Conversely, negative experiences with a parent, whether in the example of physical or sexual abuse, or in the form of neglect, abandonment, or death of the parent, causes trauma and tends to erode resilience. "Of the many factors that affect the trajectories of at-risk individuals, among the most potent is maltreatment by primary caregivers" (Luthar, 2006, p.129). For students in foster care, the parental relationship has become, by definition, risky or harmful (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. §587A). This means that other adults who enter the lives of students in foster care are not just adding a protective factor, but also compensating for what birth parents are not providing. Maintaining and increasing connections to caring adults

is essential to overcoming trauma and developing resilience (Vandevort, Henry, & Sloane, 2012). When such a supportive adult figure is not present in the immediate family, "a kindly concerned teacher, or the presence of an institutional structure such as a caring agency" could fill this role in the life of a child (Garmezy, 1991, p.421).

Students in Foster Care and the Parental Role in Education

Research shows that the involvement of adult guardians is a key predictor of educational success. For most students, parents play the central role as educational supporters. In an idealized scenario, parents should monitor their children's academic progress and engage to support and supplement their children's learning. Parents should regularly communicate with the school and when necessary advocate on their children's behalf. Parents should set rules and boundaries intended to encourage children to complete their assignments at home as well as at school. And parents should encourage their children to do well, set high expectations for them, and celebrate their successes. Students whose parents took part in more school-related activities have been shown to do better at school in several respects including reading scores, lower representation in special education, and less likelihood of being retained in grade (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999). The children of highly involved parents tend to have higher grades and test scores (Marcon, 1999). "The active participation of family members in student learning has improved student achievement, increased school attendance, decreased student dropouts, decreased delinquency, and reduced pregnancy rate" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993).

The scenario is very different for most students in foster care. As a legal matter, placement of a child in foster care interrupts the legal rights of birth parents as educational decision makers (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat 587A-5). The birth parents of many

students in foster care lack the capacity to act as educational supporters for their children. In many cases there was violence or other forms of abuse and neglect in the home that led to the child being removed. Some birth parents struggle with drug and alcohol abuse. In some cases, a birth parent is incarcerated; in other cases, one or both birth parents has passed away.

The educational decision-making role, typically exercised by birth parents, is instead assumed by the state through the exercise of jurisdiction by the family court. The part traditionally played by birth parents is subdivided and assigned to multiple actors who may include foster parents, surrogate parents, Hawaiʻi Department of Human Services (DHS) case managers, other social workers, Department of Health physical and mental health service providers, and representative of the Family Court, including GALs (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Foster parents provide food, shelter, and day-to-day care. Social service providers, including the case managers assigned to individual cases, assess needs and coordinate services and resources to support health, safety, and well-being. GALs and other representatives of the court system monitor the provision of services and advocate for the best interests of children and youth under the jurisdiction of the family court. Education professionals including classroom teachers, administrators, counselors, and those providing resources to students with special education needs shape the learning environment of students in foster care. While birth parents may not exercise educational decision-making control over students that have entered the foster care system, they may still be involved in a number of ways, and their influence on educational outcomes remains important.

Despite the array of stakeholders with an interest in the well-being of students in foster care, adequate educational support is far from guaranteed. Even well-intentioned stakeholders sometimes lack the capacity, knowledge, or consistency to support success. In some cases, the

multiplicity of actors is itself a barrier to success because of breakdowns in communication or coordination. These challenges are compounded because students in foster care may require the coordination of a variety of services related to their academic, behavioral, and emotional needs. Without consistent, committed, and knowledgeable adult advocates students in foster care may fail to receive necessary support for their educational success (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

When the court makes a determination to remove a child from his or her parents, DHS seeks to place the child in a safe and stable home environment as quickly as possible. If reunification with the parents is not an option at that time, DHS seeks a foster placement for the child (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat 587A-2). Preference is given for qualifying relatives to act as caretakers (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat 587A-10). Foster parents are expected to provide for the immediate needs of the children in their care. This includes supporting their education. In this way foster parents are expected to act in the manner birth parents would in relation to education. This includes making routine educational decision such as going on field trips or participation in sports. (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat 587A-42(2)).

Foster parents are often identified as the individuals best situated to advocate for the students in foster care because of their day-to-day contact with the students. In a study of the perspectives of different groups involved with the education of students in foster care, foster parents identified themselves as the having primary responsibility for schooling (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Smithgall et al. (2004) found that three quarters of the school principals interviewed stated that foster parents have the "same role and responsibilities as birth parents" (p.38). Similarly, social workers expressed the belief that foster parents have primary responsibility for communicating with the school. As one social worker stated, "All I'm required

to do is go to school twice a year, see how the child is doing. So I'm not really gonna have regular contact with the school like the child needs" (Smithgall et al., 2004, p.38).

However, many foster parents may lack the knowledge and experience to act as effective educational advocates. Foster parents may have to familiarize themselves with what services are available and the procedures to access these services (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Foster parents may themselves have only limited educational backgrounds or they may not prioritize education for the foster children in their care. Foster parents have been found to be less likely than birth parents to be involved in homework (Blome, 1997). Finkelstein found that eight out of nine kinship caregivers didn't help students with their homework. The reasons cited included being "too old", a lack of education, and a lack of English proficiency (Finkelstein, 2002, p.28). While some foster parents may show an interest in school assignments, students in foster care, especially those in kinship placements, report that their foster parents ask only general questions about school and homework (Finkelstein, 2002). Focus groups with child welfare social workers who liaise with school districts found a belief that foster parents were not very supportive of school and that in some cases learning and behavior issues escalated because they were not promptly addressed by foster parents (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Given the complexity of the educational landscape for many students in foster care, foster parents may lack the knowledge and sophistication to advocate effectively, especially in the realm of special education.

When a child enters foster care, she or he is assigned a case manager: a social worker employed by DHS to act as point person for the child's case. The primary legal obligation of the case manager is to ensure the health and safety of the child, to find a safe and stable foster placement, and to develop and execute a permanency plan, through either reunification with birth

parents or termination of parental rights. (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. 587A-3). In addition to case managers, a variety of other social service providers working with government agencies and non-profits may provide educational support to students in foster care.

Given the immediate, pressing concerns of safety and permanence, the effectiveness of case managers as educational supporter and advocates may be limited. Excessive caseloads and high turnover also reduce the amount of attention paid to education by case managers. Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2010) find that high levels of case manager turnover impede the relationship between case managers and foster youth. Foster parents, GALs, and social workers are more likely to understand the educational strengths and needs of foster youth they have worked with consistently over a period of time. In one study 45% of the students in foster care surveyed reported having more than one case manager in the past year. "The extent to which school staff and DCFS [Department of Children and Family Services] caseworkers can work effectively is likely to be influenced by the extent to which each has repeated interactions with the same person as opposed to a different person for each child's case" (Smithgall et al., 2004, p.34). This makes particularly troubling the finding that for every ten students on a case manager's caseload, that case manager interacts with an average of eight different schools. Furthermore, owing in part to the turnover among case managers, for every ten students in foster care in a school, that school will interact with twelve different case managers (Smithgall et al., 2004).

Case managers can also sometimes lack the experience and knowledge of the educational system necessary to be effective advocates. Stanley (2012) finds that case managers have a relatively low knowledge and high frustration with educational procedures. In many cases, the needs of students in foster care go "unnoticed and unassessed" because few case managers understand the educational challenges they face (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010, p.251).

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Advocates for Children of New York (2000) found that only 38% of the case managers surveyed indicated that they were conversant with existing laws and regulations that govern the special education process. Furthermore, only 35% of case managers reported that they routinely get involved in the special education identification, referral, and service process.

In each child welfare case, a GAL is appointed (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. 587A-16). The guiding principle for the courts, and by extension the GAL, is to pursue the best interests of the child (Child Protective Act, Haw. Rev. Stat. 587A-3). While social service professionals working with DHS and other agencies usually have more day-to-day contact with youth in foster care, ultimately it's the judiciary through the Family Court system that has decision-making authority over foster youth cases. As a representative of the court, a GAL has considerable influence over educational decision-making for students in foster care.

Of all the professionals involved with the education of students in foster care, classroom teachers may have the least access to relevant knowledge and information. School personnel may not even know a student is in foster care. In some cases, social workers are "reluctant to share any information about the child-whether he or she is even in the system or who holds education rights-which delays securing parental signatures for needed assessment and services" (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010, p.249). When information about a student in foster care does reach the school, it may not reach the teachers and other professionals working directly with the student. "Often educators at both school and district level do not know that students are in foster care and if they do know, may still lack essential information that could improve educational delivery to these children" (California Education Collaborative, 2008, p.17). When school placement instability leads to problems such a delayed registration and lost records, lack of effective information sharing has been identified as a "dominating factor" (Smithgall et al., 2004, p.36).

Even when students in foster care are identified, teachers may not be equipped to handle them. Some foster care service providers see school administrators as unsympathetic to the challenges faced by students in foster care. Beginning teachers often lack the knowledge and support to maximize educational opportunities for students in foster care (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). When schools fail to understand or address the needs of students in foster care it can represent a missed opportunity to promote resilience. "Some of the most critical facilitating factors ameliorating this problem of disconnection are teachers' sensitivity to student diversity and their ability to provide learning experiences that are responsive to cultural and individual differences" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993, p.13).

Chapter 3: Method

The principal goal of this study was to collect and analyze the stories of former foster youth about their educational experiences in Hawai'i. This study examined a single case employing a combination of intrinsic and instrumental design. Participants were young adults who had spent time in the foster care system while they were in the K-12 educational system in Hawai'i. Using in depth, semi-structured narrative interviews, the research method was designed to draw out the perspectives and impressions of the participants about the events and occurrences in their educational history. The data were coded and analyzed for themes and patterns. In keeping with the qualitative design, data collection and analysis proceeded in organic interrelation.

Design

Qualitative design was a good fit for the subject matter examined and the questions explored in this study. Qualitative research seeks to understand social phenomena from the perspective of the participants themselves (Bailey, 2007). While the existing literature provides considerable information about what happens to students in foster care, the intention behind this study was to provide additional insight into how these circumstances and events are experienced by the foster students themselves. By shedding light not only on what happened to them, but also exploring, from the participants' own perspectives, how and why what happened happened, my hope was that this study would enrich our understanding of the education of students in foster care and inform effective practice to support their educational success and resilience (Yin, 2003).

For example, there are numerous studies documenting the number and frequency of school placement changes that students in foster care undergo and how these school placement changes are linked to educational outcomes (Pecora et al., 2003; Smithgall et al., 2004; Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2009; Cutuli et al., 2012). However, there is relatively little research on how youth in foster care subjectively experience these school placement changes. Researchers have found that school placement changes can result in a mismatch of curriculum, lost credits, separation from trusted mentors, and challenges adjusting to a new peer group. But which of these factors did the foster youth themselves perceive as having the greatest effect? In many ways, the foster youth themselves are the most knowledgeable and best informed authorities on how they experienced these changes and their impact on educational success and resilience.

Qualitative research embraces a naturalistic worldview and focuses on illuminating and interpreting the experiences of the actors involved. Qualitative research explores the meaning that people ascribe to themselves, their lives, and their world. In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research does not pursue a single objective measure of truth. "Qualitative researchers believe that approaching people with the goal of trying to understand their point of view, while not perfect, distorts the informants' experience the least" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 24). The researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and data are mediated by the researcher (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The qualitative researcher does not bring a theory or hypothesis to be tested, but rather works in an iterative process with the data as it is collected to develop hypotheses and theories that match the data (Merriam, 1988). The product of qualitative research is descriptive, in that it endeavors to construct a detailed picture of the phenomenon being studied rather than seeking to untangle or isolate specific variables or results.

This research applied case study method in order to achieve a rich, in depth, and detailed examination of specific categories of experiences of students in foster care. A qualitative case study has been defined as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" (Merriam 1988, p.21). Case study is a constructivist approach that "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning, but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity" (Miller & Crabtree, 1999, p.10). Case studies invite collaboration between researcher and participant, while allowing participants space to tell their own stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). In this study, the case was defined as educationally resilient students in foster care in Hawai'i. Given the complex interrelation between educational experiences, educational resilience, and the traits of resilient narrative, the phenomenon was best studied holistically and in context. This study was exploratory in that no clear set of outcomes was hypothesized nor expected, and the hope was that the study might highlight fruitful avenues for future research (Yin, 2003).

It was essential to me that my study design served to amplify the voices of the former foster youth themselves and provided an opportunity for them to tell their stories (Riessman, 2008). Foster youth are a profoundly marginalized group. These youth often experience having crucial life decision made without their input, or at times, even their knowledge. Choosing a design that allowed the authentic voices of the participants to resonate through the study, albeit as mediated by the researcher, was an ethical imperative:

> A plethora of sources have argued in this century that the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be sustained, even for a moment. Critical theory, discourses of empowerment, psychoanalytic theory, post-structuralism, feminist and anti-colonialist theories have all concurred on this point (Alcoff, 2009, p.121).

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Theoretical Framework: Narrative Theory

This study was conducted within a framework of narrative theory. Narrative is "both phenomenon and method" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As a methodological framework, narrative inquiry is appropriate given the purpose of the research. This study is primarily concerned with what can be learned from the stories of the participating young adults. The narrative researcher listens deeply to stories in a way that ensures that a participant "who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given time and space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry endeavors to empower the participant as a collaborator in the research process while simultaneously elevating the importance of their story as a subject of research and analysis.

As a phenomenological framework, narrative theory argues that the stories we tell about ourselves not only help us organize and represent an external objective reality, but are also constantly re-creating our internal understanding of that reality, which has as much, if not more salience to our experience of the world. "In the end, we become the autobiographical narratives by which we tell about our lives" (Bruner 2004). In the process of telling ourselves our own story, our identity takes on narrative elements like character, plot, and theme. This process is particularly important for adolescents and young adults who are developmentally just maturing into the ownership of their own narratives as they "begin to reconstruct the personal past, perceive the present, and anticipate the future in terms of an internalized and evolving self story" (McAdams, 2001).

Narrative theorists have attempted to understand life stories by classifying stories according to certain narrative themes. Bruner (2004) examines certain narrative aspects-theme, discourse, and genre-to better understand stories. "Life stories may be compared and contrasted with respect to the salience of such thematic lines as agency versus communion and redemption versus contamination" (McAdams, 2001). In research exploring the relationship between resilience and the narratives of former foster youth, Thomas collected the stories of youth who had all experienced trauma or rupture of one kind or another. She went on to identify different story types: "ongoing rupture", "thriving after rupture", "helping others and giving back", and "transformation of self and others." The youth whose stories contained themes of "thriving after rupture" and "transformation of self and others" displayed the greatest level of resilience (Thomas, 2015).

To the extent that our construction of our narrative understandings of ourselves is a conscious and intentional process, narrative theory becomes highly relevant to our understanding of educational success and resilience. Attention to narrative may serve to elevate the importance of the individual as the locus of resilient process. The way we tell stories about ourselves serves to impose order and meaning on the events in our lives. "Stories do not 'happen'; rather, they are actively constructed in people's heads" (Gilling, 2016). Exercising agency and taking action is essential to developing resilience. "Passivity in the face of adversity rarely provides the necessary information for an individual to develop strategies useful in stressful conditions" (Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1993). Authoring and retelling narratives of educational success may serve as both the product of educational resilience and a process that promotes educational resilience. Through these stories, children and youth in foster care facilitate resilient reintegration after facing adversity. "The way narrative describes a strategy for encompassing a situation is not

to be understood as a literal prescription, but as an orientation to a situation, providing assistance in adjusting to it" (Rutten & Soetaert, 2013).

Participants

An initial challenge in any study is access to the site or subject of the research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I believed I was well situated to gain access to the population I intended to study. I had previously conducted research related to the education of youth in foster care in order to provide recommendations for improvement to DHS and the Family Court. The research had brought me into contact with foster youth advocates, family court practitioners, social workers, and current and former foster youth themselves. Most importantly for recruitment of participants, I had long-standing connections with several foster youth organizations: The Hawaiʻi Foster Youth Coalition, the HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leader Boards, and the Kapiolani Child Protective Center Mentoring Program. These connections were invaluable in identifying and contacting potential study participants.

I realized during the course of collecting data that I had underestimated the difficulty of conducting research with this population, my background notwithstanding. Through these organizations I received contact information for 29 former foster youth. I was able to make contact with 18, in many cases after multiple emails, phone calls, and text messages. All 18 were initially enthusiastic about participating; however, of these 18, I was unable to contact four after our initial communication. I was ultimately able to schedule interviews with 14 prospective participants. However, of the 14, five either cancelled the interview or did not appear as scheduled. In one case, a prospective participant told me that she was on her way to the interview but never arrived and I was unable to ever contact her again. In another case, I scheduled two

interviews on Maui, but when I got there I was only able to contact one of the prospective interviewees. Ultimately nine participants agreed to be interviewed and followed through with interviews. Eight of those nine interviews were used in this study. It became clear during one of the interviews that the participant did not fit the criteria for the study. She had been adopted before she began kindergarten. The interview was completed and the interviewee had the opportunity to tell her story, but the interview data were not ultimately used in the study. Most of the interviews were conducted on Oahu; however one interview was conducted on Maui and one was conducted on the Big Island.

Participant Criteria

Participants were selected based on their ability to speak from personal knowledge about the kindergarten to 12th grade educational experiences of students in foster care in Hawaiʻi. Therefore, participants had to have spent a significant amount of time in an out-of-home placement during their school years. An out-of-home placement could mean a relative or non-relative foster placement or a group home setting. I initially established six months as the minimum amount of time in care as a criterion for participation; however, all the participants spent considerably longer in care. Participants also had to have attended at least two years of school between kindergarten and 12th grade in Hawaiʻi, and there had to have been overlap with the time they were in care. All the participants whose data was used for this study spent the entire time from kindergarten to 12th grade in Hawaiʻi.

Participants were limited to the ages of 18-25. The reason to exclude those under 18 was primarily practical; securing appropriate consent to participate for youth involved with the foster care system was complex and challenging. However, the risk of emotional harm to the

participants was also likely to increase for younger participants. The reason for capping the age of participants at 25 was to enhance the currency and reliability of the data. Given ongoing changes in child welfare practice as well as the education system, these accounts were deemed more likely to reflect the current state of these systems. Furthermore, the reliability of data from retrospective interviews, already a concern, would increase as more time passed since the experiences.

Participant Profiles

- **Melanie: female, born 1993**

Melanie grew up primarily on Oahu, but also spent significant time on Maui. She transitioned in and out of care and through numerous foster placements. She felt that her parents, despite periods of incarceration and homelessness, supported her educational success. Participation in sports had an important positive influence on her school experience. Melanie suspected that she was wrongly identified for special education.

Melanie completed high school and earned her associate's degree in education from University of Hawaii-Hilo. She intended become a teacher or work with children in another capacity.

- **Adriana: female, born 1994**

Adriana grew up on Kauai. Her family had a history of child services involvement and she entered care at the beginning of high school. She was placed in relative foster care alternating between two sets of grandparents. She presented behavioral challenges at school, and had significant involvement with the juvenile justice system. Involvement with extracurricular

activities including sports played a positive role in her story. Her academic performance and behavior underwent a major positive transformation during high school.

Adriana completed high school and earned her bachelor's degree. After the interview was completed, she also earned a master's degree in social work.

- **Kawhi: male, born in 1990**

Kawhi grew up on Oahu. He first entered foster care in elementary school and spent several years of high school in care until he aged out. His foster parents at his final foster placement were positive and supportive of education. He saw himself as an average student. He received services for attention-deficit disorder.

Kawhi graduated from high school and received a BA in Public Administration. After the interview, he entered a program to earn his Masters in Social Work with the goal of becoming a mental health professional.

Kawhi had a strong affinity for the Kalihi where he grew up and his story emphasized the importance of maintaining his school placement at Farrington.

- **Alika: male, born in 1991.**

Alika grew up on the Big Island. He was placed in care for brief periods of time before high school. He then entered care when he was fifteen until he aged out at eighteen. He had a good relationship with his foster father who he stayed with during this period. He considered himself an average student in high school, but felt he was more successful when he reached college. Alika formed strong bonds with a number of social service providers and placed a high value on garnering social capital.

Alika graduated from high school and earned his BA in Psychology and Communication. He entered the Masters of Social Work program at UH in fall 2017.

- **Lucy: female, born 1991.**

Lucy grew up on Oahu. She was fourteen when her mother passed away and she entered foster care until she aged out. She was placed with non-relative foster parents with whom she had a complex relationship. She was an academically successful student through most of school, with the exception of a period of lower achievement at the end of high school. Lucy had a deep sense of gratitude for the success she has enjoyed in life and she has been inspired by the memory of her mother.

Lucy graduated from high school and college and after the interview she completed a Masters of Social Work.

- **Sharon: female, born 1991.**

Sharon spent parts of elementary school on both Oahu and the Big Island and then attended high school on the Big Island. She had several unsuccessful foster placements before taking part in an experimental program that moved her between three different families. She was academically successful overall, but found math consistently challenging. She was uncertain about her future goals, but she knew she wanted a career that involved helping other people.

Sharon graduated from high school and at the time of the interview had completed some college.

- **Nick: male, born 1993.**

Nick grew up on the Big Island, though he spent 11th grade on Oahu. His home life was characterized by violence and ongoing involvement with child services. He spent time in both relative foster care and non-relative foster care. Nick was identified for special education due to a learning disability and conduct disorder. He developed positive relationships with his special education teacher and counselors. Nick placed a high value on hard work and self-sufficiency.

Nick completed high school and attended University of Hawaii-Hilo, where he earned a certificate in auto body repair and painting.

- **Caitlin: female, born 1995**

Caitlin grew up mostly on Oahu, but also spent a considerable amount of time and attended school on Kauai. She transitioned through numerous, less-than-successful foster placements. Her academic performance fluctuated considerably over time. She struggled to cope with the adversity and trauma she had experienced, and she had significant behavioral challenges at school.

Caitlin graduated from high school and at the time of the interview had completed some college. Caitlin was deeply committed to working with and advocating for children and youth in foster care. She aspired to earn a graduate degree in social work, a law degree, or both.

Interviews

The interviews were intended to elicit information about specific educational events and condition as well as the role played by adult supporters. However, I also hoped to gain insight into the participants' perspectives and their perception of their experiences. To achieve these goals, the interviews blended narrative and semi-structured interviewing technique. Narrative interviews are largely non-structured, inviting participants to decide what information is important to share (Lindloff & Taylor, 2010). In a semi-structured interview, the researcher uses an interview guide with specific questions organized by topic. In both narrative and semi-structured interviewing, the conversation is allowed to develop and progress organically, rather than following a set order of questions (Bailey, 2007).

The intent was to conduct the interviews in a location and environment convenient and comfortable for the participants. Four of the interviews were conducted in restaurants or coffee shops, including the interviews conducted on the Big Island and Maui. Three interviews were conducted in a conference room at the William S. Richardson School of Law. One interview was conducted at the participant's office.

At the beginning of each interview I described the research, had the participant sign the consent form, and answered any questions from the participant. I also discussed my own background in education and child welfare and personal interest in the subject of the study. I made small talk, asking the participant a few questions about themselves unrelated to the research. In short, I did all that I could do to establish connection and rapport. However, I'm also conscious that these efforts to establish rapport were an attempt to overcome what was a

significant divide between me and the former foster youth participants in terms of ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic background.

> Although an interviewer might attempt to isolate the interview relationship from that context and make it unique to the interviewer and the participant, the social forces of class, ethnicity, race, and gender, as well as other societal identities, impose themselves (Seidman, 1998, p.95).

Each interview began with an open-ended invitation to participants to "tell the story of their education." Interviews were responsive to the participants, pursuing subjects on which they placed the greatest importance. Interviews encouraged participants to engage in storytelling and assigning meaning to events, in keeping with a guided conversation model of interviewing (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). All participants were asked a range of questions about their educational experiences including, but not limited to, school performance, school placement changes, receipt of special education services, retention, attendance, disciplinary issues and suspensions, mentors, home support, extra-curricular participation, peer-interaction, perception of themselves as learners, and recommendations for improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. I conducted a review and self-evaluation of my interviewing approach after each interview (Arksey & Knight, 1999). This was particularly useful at the beginning of the data collection process.

Data Analysis Process

All interviews were recorded on a digital audio recording device. Each recording was then stored on my secure computer. I transcribed the recordings in two steps. I first listened to each recorded interview while speaking it aloud as it was transcribed by voice recognition software. I then listened to each recorded interview a second time while correcting any errors or omissions that occurred during the voice recognition process. Although time-consuming, taking up to ten hours for every hour of interview transcribed, the transcription process was an invaluable step in analyzing the interviews. While listening to the tapes multiple times I was able to familiarize myself with not just the words, but also the inflection, tone, and affect of each speaker. Collection and analysis of data is not clearly delineated in qualitative research as it typically is in quantitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Transcribing the initial interviews also allowed me to begin to identify themes and patterns in the data during the data collection process and to generate additional questions. As I transcribed the early interviews, patterns and themes began to emerge from the data. This iterative process informed my approach to subsequent interviews.

After an initial, holistic reading of each interview transcript for meaning, I began to code individual statements or segments of text. Coding is the process of sorting rich, context-based qualitative data so as to identify key topics, themes, and patterns in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). In analyzing the narratives I used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I initially coded according to broad categories addressing the two primary topics of the study: the educational experiences of the participants and their relationships with adult supporters. As I continued to sift and sort the data, thematic categories emerged within each of the two main topics. The participants' narrative of their educational experiences included discussion of

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academic performance, special education, truancy, extracurricular activities, the impact of disruption and trauma, attitudes toward school, conduct at school, disciplinary consequences, and school placement changes. Further analysis led me to organize these findings around three primary categories: academic performance, non-academic conduct and consequences, and school placement stability. Participants' narratives about their relationships with adult supporters addressed different classes of adult actors, each with specific assets and limitations as educational supporters and advocates: birth families, foster parents, social service providers, GALs, and teachers and other school personnel.

For me, the most surprising part of the data collection and analysis process was recognizing the importance of narrative and storytelling, not just as a research method, but also as a subject of inquiry. During the interviewing process, I was stuck by the rhetorical and affective impact of the participants' stories. I began to observe patterns and themes in the narratives themselves. This led me to go through all the data again to code segments according to narrative categories. The most evident narrative thematic categories that emerged were positivity and optimism, agency and empowerment, future focus and goal setting, and resilient reintegration. Given that these categories also represent common characteristics of resilient individuals, they appeared to be a good fit for the data. Furthermore, these themes are related to the type of purposeful storytelling in which nearly all the participants had engaged.

The findings in this study are organized around themes and categories that arose during the data analysis process. Alternatively, the study could have presented in depths portraits of each participant before extrapolating and exploring the common themes in the narratives. Such an approach could have allowed the reader to come to a deeper appreciation of each participant as an individual. The findings are not presented in this way for reasons related to preserving the

anonymity of the participants, the intimate nature of the information shared in the interviews, and the essence of the case being studied.

The people and communities of Hawaiʻi are profoundly interconnected. In this context, it was particularly important to me that the participants felt confident and comfortable that their anonymity was preserved. During member checks, one participant requested that I omit the names of the schools the participant attended; and I did so. I felt that this request affirmed my decision not to present the narratives of the participants individually. While the organization of the findings does not alter the information actually presented, I believed that the participants could feel more revealed if the study presented detailed portraits of each participant.

I also believed that individually presenting each participant's narrative would tend to emphasize disruption over resilience. All the participants experienced trauma and adversity. Given the gravity and intensity of these experiences, they inherently invite attention. Yet, despite the importance of these events, the participants themselves tended to emphasize other aspects of their stories. I did not believe that the individual narratives of the participants could be accurately portrayed without providing additional details about the events and circumstances that led them to foster care.

This study examined the experiences of the participants as a single case characterized not only by the adversity and disruption they faced, but by the resilience of their response to disruption. I felt that by organizing the findings around the themes and categories of a single case, rather than around individual stories, I could best represent the perspectives of the participants in relation to their educational experiences and their educational stories.

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Rigor

Because qualitative research seeks to examine complex systems holistically, endeavors to draw out the subjective experiences of participants, and relies on the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection, measures of rigor different than those used in quantitative research must be employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research ensures rigor by taking step to maximize the trustworthiness of the results. Guba (1985) suggests four dimensions of trustworthiness for qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility in qualitative research differs from quantitative because qualitative research eschews the goal of isolating specific variables for study. Instead, the qualitative researcher's "solution is to deal with the patterns in their entirety, but take certain actions that take account of the complexities" (Guba, 1981, p.84). In this way, the relative importance of key factors and themes is analyzed organically, while making efforts to control for interference and bias. Some of the techniques employed in this study to enhance credibility are prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks

Prolonged exposure enhances the rigor of qualitative research because "extended interaction with a situation or milieu leads inquirers to an understanding of it" (Guba, 1981). Each interview I conducted was at least sixty minutes, with the longest nearly two hours long. Overall, the data collection process lasted more than a year. I also believe that my long involvement with child education and foster care provided me with a deeper understanding of the study participants and the phenomena they were describing.

In the interest of enhancing credibility, I sought out peers "to test [my] growing insights and to expose [myself] to searching questions" (Guba, 1981). I shared portions of my data and initial findings with three peers with extensive experience in qualitative research, familiarity with children and youth in the foster care system, or both. The peer reviewers all agreed that the findings accurately reflected themes in the data and were relevant and salient to the study goals. The reviewers also asked questions and made suggestions that influenced my analysis and findings.

"No information ought to be accepted that cannot be verified by at least two sources (Guba, 1981). Confirmation of data via triangulation was particularly important for this study. The study relied on retrospective interviews. Retrospective interviews are prone to error not only because the data is self-reported, but also because of the impact of the passage of time on memory and understanding. I was not able to corroborate all the specific recollections in the interviews. However, I solicited feedback on my data from two colleagues with decades of experience with foster youth, education, and child welfare. I reviewed my findings with these peers and asked for their input on both the substantive and interpretive accuracy of the findings. They responded that the substantive elements of the findings were factually consistent with the operation of the family court and child welfare system. Their response also helped me to develop a more complete understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives.

Member checks are "the single most important action inquirers can take, for it goes to the heart of the credibility criterion" (Guba, 1981). Member checks involve reviewing the data collected with study participants to confirm that what was recorded is what was said. Member checks were an integral part of my study design. One goal of this research was to allow youth in foster care to tell their own stories and construct their own meaning relative to their experiences

in the educational system. My goal was to involve the study participants in the data collection process as collaborators rather than merely as research subjects. After each interview, I provided the participant with a transcript for review. I invited them to point out any error, suggest any changes, or elaborate in any way they liked. All except one of the participants responded, verifying the overall accuracy of the transcript. Three of the participants provided specific corrections and clarifications. I also shared a nearly final draft of the study with all the participants. Four of the participants responded, endorsing both the representation of their words and ideas as well as the findings of the research.

In qualitative research, transferability does not imply results that are universally generalizable. From the qualitative perspective, reality is inherently bound to a specific context. This does not imply that each finding is so peculiar to its setting that it has no broader relevance. Research demonstrates transferability when it can be shown to have applicability in different situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given that qualitative researchers view findings as context-bound, understanding the context of the findings is essential for understanding their applicability in other situations. I conducted my interviews is such a way as to elicit rich detail from the participants. I encouraged the participants to tell their story freely. By extensively including the actual words and ideas of the participants, this study is intended to invite the reader to determine whether these finding may be transferable to other situations or relevant to understanding other research.

Establishing dependability involves demonstrating that a given set of results could be replicated, while acknowledging that the qualitative perspective recognizes reality to be changeable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to enhance dependability in this study, I

maintained an audit trail, documenting methods, process, and research decisions made during the data collection and analysis process.

Qualitative research demonstrates confirmability when steps are taken to ensure that the subjectivity and biases of the researcher have not led to avoidable error nor distorted the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Unlike quantitative research, qualitative inquiry does not aspire to maintain researcher objectivity, indeed the qualitative perspective views such objectivity as impossible to achieve. From this perspective, the best way to prevent error in research is for the researcher to explicitly acknowledge her or his biases and to reflect on the ways these beliefs may influence decision-making.

Throughout the research and analysis process, I endeavored to explore and understand my own preconceptions and biases in relation to the subject matter of this study. I engaged in reflection in an effort to better understand these subjective perspectives. In order to make my biases and subjective beliefs explicit to the reader as well, I have included as part of my finished manuscript a statement of my perspectives and beliefs relative to the subject of my research. This allows the reader to understand how these beliefs may have influenced decisions I have made regarding the research.

Limitations

This study was subject to several limitations. The study relied on self-reported, retrospective interviews. As with any self-reported data, participants may have misreported their own experiences, intentionally or inadvertently. In addition, the passage of time allowed for both the erosion of memory and changing interpretations. While a certain measure of error is unavoidable, I believe member checks and triangulation have helped to reduce error in the

interview data. In addition, I conducted the interviews in a way that encourages participants to reconstruct rather than remember events (Seidman, 1998).

This study was limited in terms of the size of the sample. I originally attempted to contact 29 former foster youth. I made efforts over more than 18 months to make contact and to arrange interviews. Thus, while the small sample is regrettable, I believe it is a function of the population I was studying. Former foster youth often experience turbulence and instability in their lives. I made diligent efforts to secure participants for the study. I also believe that in the context of a qualitative study, using in depth interviews, the sample size was less of a limitation on the ultimate findings.

Another related limitation is that participants composed a non-random convenience sample. As such, the sample omitted certain segments of the population of former foster youth, including those in the military, those who were homeless, those who were incarcerated, and those who were receiving in-patient mental health or substance abuse services. I attempted to address this limitation by trying to recruit participants who had experienced periods of homelessness or incarceration since leaving foster care. At least two of the participants had experienced periods of homelessness. Another strategy was to recruit participants who had a history with the juvenile justice system, as there is a strong correlation between juvenile justice involvement and adult incarceration. At least three of the participants were involved with the juvenile justice system.

Even with these efforts to recruit a more representative sample, I anticipated that the participants would, on average, be experiencing more adult success than the typical foster care alumni. In the end, the study participants all proved to be educationally resilient, relative to the

adversity they had faced, and as a group they were highly educationally successful. This represents a limitation in one way, because the results from this sample are likely to be less generalizable than would be the case with a random sample. The experiences and perspective of these youth may paint too rosy a picture relative to the educational experiences of youth in foster care as a population.

The non-randomness of the sample also provided an opportunity, however. To the extent that the participants experienced better than average educational success, their narratives serve as a model of sorts. They provided insights into factors impacting educational success and resiliency. They provided information about how key individuals and mentor can influence the educational trajectory of students in foster care. Furthermore, the sample was also anomalous in that all except one of the participants had received encouragement and guidance to purposefully share their personal stories. This is one of the factors that led me to apply narrative theory as an interpretive lens to the research. In this way, the non-randomness of the sample actually expanded and enhanced the value of the findings.

Researcher Statement

I am a straight, white, cisgender, middle class, male in my late 40s who grew up in New York City in a relatively stable two-parent household, and during the data collection process I was acutely aware of the many divides of experience and perspective between me and the participants.

I have been a teacher at multiple levels, from elementary to post-graduate, for nearly half my life and I'm currently a faculty member at the William S. Richardson School of Law in Hawai'i. I acknowledge a fundamental belief that education plays an essential function in society

and has the potential to not only advance, but also ennoble the individual. This is one reason why I chose to conduct this particular study, but I'm sure my bias towards the intrinsic value of education comes through in other ways.

For over ten years I have co-taught an interdisciplinary class on child welfare. This class has brought me into contact with many current and former foster youth, social workers, and GALs. I have many friends and colleagues involved with child welfare. Given my exposure to the topic, I entered this study with certain assumptions. Some assumptions were confirmed by the findings, like the limited information sharing between child welfare and school personnel. In other cases, the results surprised me, such as the limited number of participants who identified teachers as key supporters. To minimize confirmation bias I tried to represent the ideas and opinions of the participants as fully and faithful as possible.

Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the conditions and events that affect the educational experiences of students in foster care. In this chapter, the findings of the study are presented in response to the three primary research questions:

•   How do young adults who were in foster care during their childhood and youth characterize their K-12 school experience? What obstacles to academic success did they face?

•   Which adult actors do these young adults believe had the greatest influence on their school experiences? What aspects of these relationships proved more or less supportive of academic success?

•   How do the narrative characteristics and themes that arise in the educational stories of academically successful students in foster care reflect and reinforce their educational success and resilience?

In responding to these questions, this chapter presents the research findings in three broad categories: Educational Experiences and Outcomes at School; Adult Supporters of Educational Success and Resilience; and the Narrative Themes in the Participants' Educational Stories. Within each of these categories, several subcategories of findings are addressed.

Educational Experiences and Outcomes at School

It is difficult to generalize about the educational experiences of the participants in the study, because their experiences varied a great deal. However, some broad patterns are evident. It is clear that while the participants have achieved considerable educational success, they have all faced considerable challenges, often resulting directly or indirectly, from the disruption and

trauma attendant to foster care. All the participants went through at least some period of lower academic performance. And despite placing a high value on school and education, the majority also displayed at least some negative behaviors at school. As a result, many suffered more or less severe disciplinary consequences. In addition, school placement instability, or conversely, the opportunity to maintain a preferred school placement, played a major part in the educational stories of several of the participants. In setting forth these findings, this section is divided into three topics: academic performance, non-academic conduct and consequences, and school placement stability.

Academic Performance

There is considerable variation in academic performance of the participants. Individual participants also had different levels of success at different stages of their progress through elementary, middle, and high school. Some were definitely more successful overall. As a group, it can be said that every one of the participants faced academic challenges. However, they were all ultimately able to progress to graduation and to pursue higher education in one form or another. This section also discusses the experiences of three of the participants-Nick, Melanie, and Kawhi-who were identified for special education services. Finally, the section addresses extracurricular activities; while some of the participants felt that they received great benefits from participation, several participants also discussed how participation was deterred or constrained by lack of support from adult actors.

Lucy described herself as a high performing student throughout the majority of her K-12 education. She consistently pushed herself to be successful in school. "I always did well in school." This led the social workers monitoring her education to view her as unlikely to

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encounter difficulties. Lucy explained, "And the fact that I had gotten As and Bs throughout my whole high school career I don't think they thought that my education was going to be a problem." This suggests that in some cases, case managers may be more likely to respond reactively to academic problems, especially for higher performing students, rather than to proactively maximize educational opportunities for students in foster care.

Alika and Kawhi depict themselves as relatively average students throughout school. Alika said, "I think I did the best I could. You know, I think I had B's. You know, B kinda student." Similarly, Kawhi shared, "And I got decent grades: B's and C's. But I passed." Melanie also described herself as a relatively average student, although she had trouble clearly characterizing herself as a student, "I think it's because I really sucked at the testing. But in class work, I would do good." Her experience is also shaped by her identification for special education in elementary and middle school.

Sharon described herself as generally doing well in school, but struggling in a particular subject. "I was really good at everything except math. So I try to stay away from anything mathematical. I had a really good education, I guess." Her performance was strong enough to be placed in an Advanced Placement History course, "Just because I did really good my sophomore year." Unfortunately, the results from the class were disappointing, "And that was the hardest class in my life. I think that might've been my only F throughout high school." Nonetheless, Sharon had an overall positive impression of the experience, appreciating the opportunity to attempt the challenging work.

For a number of the participants, academic performance was directly affected by events related to their home life and foster care status. This resulted in fluctuations in performance and

lower GPAs overall. Before the start of ninth grade, Adriana was essentially abandoned by her mother and left responsible, not only for herself, but also for her younger siblings. As a result, she did not attend for most of the first semester. Her grades suffered as a result, but she rebounded during the second semester. Adriana said, "Even if I got all Fs over here, this first semester; I got all A's and B's over here. So, it kinda canceled out; so I passed with Cs at the end." When Caitlin learned that there was no chance she would be reunited with her birth family, she experienced a precipitous drop in grades. "It just really affected my grades. My freshman year of high school, that first year I got straight Fs." Even Lucy, who sustained consistently high levels of academic success, experienced a drop in grades when she learned that her foster parents would not attend her graduation. Her foster parents made a choice to attend a family wedding instead. Lucy explained how she responded to this news:

> And when I found that out, I'm not going to lie, my grades started to slip. If you look at my report cards from my high school years, that last two quarters; I think I got like Cs and Ds. I think I had to do a remedial math class because, I really, that one just, "Really?"

All the participants described academic challenges when they first entered care or changed foster placement.

Some of the participants also pointed to academic turning points, when their performance improved dramatically. Both Adriana and Caitlin described a turning point during high school when they became considerably more successful in school. Adriana explained:

> By the time I hit my junior year it was all done with and I was on this fresh type of path. So really everything happens in my junior year where I kind of saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

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In Caitlin's case, the turnaround she described was also dramatic. "Honestly, my senior year of high school I like totally shaped up and did a 360." They attributed these changes to both external factors, like receiving aid and encouragement from supporters and to internal factors, like increased self-confidence and motivation. Nick struggled academically throughout school, but he also described an improvement in his academic performance over time, which he credited to a good fit with teachers and transition to a more appropriate classroom environment.

Special Education.

Three of the eight study participants, Nick, Melanie, and Kawhi, reported qualifying for and receiving services under either the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504). This is a considerably higher proportion than would be anticipated for a random sample of Hawaiʻi students; according to Federal Department of Education data, in 2010, only 10.6% of the public school population in Hawaiʻi qualified for services under IDEA. Each of the study participants who received special education services had different experiences, so their stories are presented separately.

Nick described himself as facing both learning and behavioral challenges. "I have a problem with reading. I was OK with math. I still have a problem with reading. Well, I have a problem with writing. I can read fine, but I mix up words." He shared that he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. He also explained that during middle and high school, he was highly confrontational. "It's kind of weird. Personally, I used to like pissing other people off." Nick pointed to behavioral issues as the primary reason he was placed in special education. "I actually had anger problems and all this other stuff, so I was always in special ed."

Nick had a generally positive view of the special education services he received. He was placed in a fully self-contained classroom (FSC) where he received modified curriculum and behavioral support. "So I went to FSC; best thing that ever happened." He responded well to the way material was taught to maximize engagement. "Everything was about sports, so it was more something that a guy would want. So he was about football. We would do our stats about football. That's our math. Read about football." He felt that the anger management skills he received were especially valuable. "That helped me step back and use my words instead of my fists kind of thing." He also appreciated the role that his counselor played in mediating his relationship with other teachers. Nick recalled one way that his counselor helped to develop appropriate classroom accommodations.

> When I was mad, one of my counselors told the teacher, when he's not feeling good, you have to work with him. So if he needs to take a walk, let him take a walk. And without disturbing the class he'll put a magnet up on your board so that you know that he's just going to take a walk.

Melanie had a very different experience with special education. She was identified for special education early in elementary school. Melanie readily acknowledges that she was significantly behind in terms of her academic progress. "I guess from moving from one place to another, I never really knew how to write my own name by the time I was in, like, the third grade. I had to literally try to have somebody assist me." However, Melanie suspected that she might have been misidentified for special education. "What I learned from school was that I picked up things faster than others. They didn't see me as someone who would fit in the description of special ed."

She believed that she was identified for special education, not because of a learning disability, but because of curricular incoherence caused by family instability and truancy caused by frequent moves and periods of homelessness. "But they just took me in there because I was lacking that extra education. I mean, I was smart, but I just wasn't up to the level with the rest of my classmates." Given that Melanie's family was coping with homelessness and drug abuse, teachers and administrators may have formed stigmatic impressions of her ability and attitude.

> I've been labeled it ever since. I know preschool there was this one teacher that I cannot get out of my mind because she would scold me every day for something that I would do. I mean she's been stuck in my head.

Melanie felt that the transition out of special education was unnecessarily difficult, even after she caught up with content and began to demonstrate academic competency. "I was still put in that place, when I knew I could do better. But every time they would give me something that was harder, that I couldn't understood, they would put me back one level." She recalled that it was her own effort and drive, rather than the special education services she received, that allowed her to progress.

> We would try to read aloud. And that's how it got me into it. Every time I get stumped on a word…I would follow along with the words of what it was that they said and if they match the same letters and sounds I would catch on, hold on to that word. Just copy what they say. When it hit my turn, I knew exactly what word was what word. So it's like taking off and teaching myself how to do that. That's how I learned.

Melanie eventually transitioned out of special education and developed into an academically successful student with strong work habits. "Doing my homework on time. Finish my projects on time. Reading my book every day. Reading my book was actually my hobby."

Kawhi had a 504 plan resulting from a diagnosis of ADHD. He reported having a positive relationship with his surrogate parent who advocated on his behalf and connected him with services at a local community center. He was also aware that he had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) which is a written statement of the educational program designed to meet the needs of students receiving special education services. Interestingly, although he knew that he had an IEP and a surrogate parent, it was only during the course of the interview that he associated these factors with a special education identification. "That's weird, because now in retrospect…at that time I never thought of myself being in Special Ed. Which may be for the best. I always thought of a surrogate parent as being like a GAL, but for school."

This raises the possibility that other participants may have been identified for special education, either through IDEA or Section 504, without being aware of the fact. Adriana and Caitlin both received significant therapeutic and social support services which could have been encompassed in an IEP. However these two participants also had significant involvement with the juvenile justice system, so the services they received may have been ordered by the court rather than provided through an IEP. Both these participants reported that they never received academic support to address a learning disability. Caitlin observed, "No. I was always in regular ed. I wish I did, though. It would've been so much easier."

Extracurricular Activities.

Several participants were involved with sports and other extracurricular activities at school. Alika, Melanie, and Adriana saw a variety of benefits that resulted from their involvement with sports. Alika struggled to make friends and felt socially isolated during high school; but, he gained connection and camaraderie from his participation in sports. "I enjoyed the sports. I had friends, especially in sports, I had friends." For Melanie, participation in sports provided an escape from other aspects of her life. "I would get into any kind of sports I can possibly do, so I wouldn't have to stay home and deal with all the people that's in that house. I would stay out as much as I could." Adriana felt like sports provided an avenue for success that she did not have in other aspects of her life. She felt valued and appreciated when her paddling coach recognized her as inspirational Paddler of the Year. "Hey, I've never been awarded nothing in my life before. I've been always looked down upon, or doing something bad. It felt actually really good to do something good. Like when someone acknowledged that you are trying your best." In addition to building self-esteem and confidence, Adriana argued that participation in sports and other activities bolstered her academic performance, too. She rejected the notion that participation in extracurricular activities was a distraction from academics.

> Like some people may say that might've been too much to be involved in these clubs, in like sports and stuff like. Some people will say, like, why did I do all that when I had like so much going on in my life; just focus on school. But being part of those things, like I said, gave me a purpose and allowed me to open up more doors.

Non-Academic Conduct and Consequences

As with their academic performance, socio-emotional well-being and behavior at school varied between participants and over time. However, the participants' stories shared certain common characteristics. All the participants felt that disruption and trauma related to foster care interfered with their performance at school. Nonetheless, the participants shared a generally positive attitude about the value of education and school. Most of the participants displayed at least some negative behavior at school, including fighting and truancy. A majority of the participants were suspended as a disciplinary consequence for negative behavior at school. In many cases, negative behavior at school correlated directly with disruptive events related to foster care. In some cases, academic and disciplinary consequences may have been influenced by perceptions of students in foster care.

Impact of Disruption and Trauma.

Every child who enters into foster care experiences emotional disruption to a greater or lesser degree. All the study participants discussed the emotional toll of their experiences and how this was reflected in academic performance. Kawhi explained how the experiences of youth in care can impact school performance.

> It's because they've got underlying trauma that needs to be addressed. And they got taken away from their parents' home. Or they were abused at their foster home. Or they were abused at their parents' home. And they are trying to find a way to cope with it.

The trauma experienced by youth in foster care impacts not only their mental health, but also their ability to focus and perform academically and to meet behavioral expectations. Caitlin

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experienced emotional disturbances that led to disciplinary consequences at school. She explained how trauma has a lasting impact on her ability to function at school.

> But like school…school will always be challenging because of my mental health. I have PTSD really badly and it's a PTSD they can never be cured. They say it is a rare type. Because of the fact that my abuse is so prolonged and it keeps happening. The intensity will go up and down depending on what experiences I go through. But it'll never go away, which sucks. Because like it's scary sometimes; because I get it in class. Like, I don't know if I'm going to scream or not.

The focus and attention of students in foster care can be impaired both by the effects of past trauma and by the uncertainty of their present situations. Lucy described her feelings about being placed in foster care with a family she did not know well. "And so that was the start; I was very unsure. Like why are you going to put me with someone who I don't want to be with, who has never been a part of my life?" The participants explained how they were affected by events related to their birth parents and progress of their cases in the Family Court; how they worried about their siblings and other family members. Kawhi described how these outside factors can impact a youth's performance at school. "You got all that mixed up together, the last thing a youth wants to do is do well in school. They're probably going to be more concerned with seeing their family, having visitation with their siblings, stuff like that." Kawhi, Caitlin, Adriana, Melanie, and Lucy all discussed the worry and sadness associated with having siblings in foster care.

Several of the participants discussed struggles with depression; Caitlin, Alika, and Adriana all revealed that they had thoughts of suicide during middle school or high school.

Caitlin described how early experiences of abuse led to her depression and anxiety. "It sucks, because I never had a childhood. It got ripped away, because of my stepdad and my mom. I just really wish I had a normal life." Alika had trouble making friends and felt isolated and depressed during high school. "And to be honest I was very…I was kinda depressed in high school. Times, I'd have suicidal ideologies and whatnot." Caitlin also experienced feelings of hopelessness that led to suicidal thoughts. "I know what it's like to feel unloved. I know what it's like to feel like your world is crashing down on you. To feel so emotionally hurt that you do feel like suicide's the only answer." Adriana also went through periods of depression, cutting, and self-destructive behavior. "In seventh grade, actually, I had suicidal thoughts, a lot."

Some of the participants also talked about the anger they felt as a result of their situation and the ways this anger was expressed at school. Nick reflected on how his own anger had at times erupted into acts of extreme violence, and related it to the challenges faced by foster youth generally.

Every youth in foster care will tell you a story similar to what I just told you. Because everybody probably had violence in their life. Everybody probably didn't know how to channel it. Because there was nobody there at the home who could protect them or guide them.

Caitlin recalled yelling at people and lashing out unpredictably. "A lot of people know me in foster care as the girl not to mess with because I used to just be really angry and really upset with the world."

Attitude Toward School.

Despite the challenges they faced, the participants in the study had an overall positive attitude towards school. However, this general perspective was not without variation among participants and over time. Kawhi reflected that he had felt some ambivalence about school in elementary and middle school. "I guess I was neutral about school. I didn't hate it. Like I didn't maliciously cut school because I hated it. I wasn't really passionate about it. I guess I just went with the flow." Melanie shared that, while she enjoyed some aspects of school, she never cared much for homework. Caitlin described how her experiences in foster care made performance in school more challenging.

> School was hard. School was especially hard because of the fact that, like, we not only have to deal with like what regular teenagers go through, we have to deal with, like, feeling unloved, feeling abandoned, living with strangers, being reminded that you are different.

Nonetheless, even the participants who expressed their displeasure with certain aspects of school also placed a high value on school performance and academic achievement. For Alika, school offered the means to be more successful than his birth parents had been. "I just wanted to do great at whatever it was. I didn't really know what it was. I just wanted to do better." Lucy saw school as a path to professional achievement and financial security.

> So when I started to realize that struggling isn't normal, and you don't have to struggle, and if you set yourself up for success by going to school, and the outcomes of what you go to education for versus your job and your career and compensation, that's when I decided there is no second guess to this. I have to continue to get an education. Because

it's not normal to struggle and it's not normal to have to worry about money all the time

or live paycheck to paycheck.

She also discussed how she viewed education as a gateway to new opportunities and experiences. She felt that other members of her family were content to live in the same way their parents had lived and were reluctant to take risks, pursue new opportunities, or to explore the world.

Because local people live here. That's just what they knew. And you know what? I wasn't about that. I wanted to see what was out there. I was curious, you know, to know. There has to be something more than this. And am I going to take the steps to go and do it or not?

Caitlin felt that education provided an opportunity to avoid the pitfalls to which her parents had fallen prey. "Day in and day out I remind myself I'm breaking this cycle. Because I'm not going to end up…if I'm going to have a kid, I want to be able to provide for my kids." She used the negative example of her parents as motivation for educational perseverance. "That's why I push myself so hard in school, because I want to be able to have a future." Adriana explained how she saw knowledge and education as the key to escaping cycles of poverty, addiction, and abuse; education promised freedom. "I didn't want to end up like any of my friends or my mom or my brother. And I don't want to feel like I'm stuck. I want to be able to spread my wings out and explore."

Several of the participants expressed their feeling that school was a place of refuge, often less stressful than other aspects of their lives in foster care. While school performance, grades, and homework may entail the greatest responsibilities for many teenagers, some of the study

participants had been largely taking care, not only of themselves, but also of siblings or other family members. Adriana had borne enormous responsibility for her siblings before she entered care. "So I would take care of them and my siblings while my mom and those guys were out. And they wouldn't come home until late." She was only 13 or 14 at the time and the experience was sometimes overwhelming. "Some mornings we would wake up and nobody's home. And like it was scary actually, waking up with nobody home, and you have to get ready for school. I don't know." Melanie, who had also been taking care of her younger siblings, found that school could prove a welcome respite. "Yeah, I mean school was like a sanctuary that I liked as well, to go to school."

Melanie also saw school as a place to escape not only responsibility, but some of the more difficult realities of her life in foster care. "Get away from all that. Being away from the fact that you are in a separate home from the rest of your siblings and your parents." Sharon, who moved between different foster placements, and often chafed under the restrictions placed on her in the homes, welcomed school as a space of relative freedom. "I just felt like school was that one place I could run away to and escape everything going on at home." Caitlin said simply, "School was my escape." Among the participants, Sharon, Caitlin, and Melanie faced the highest level of foster placement instability; for them in particular school may have represented a more predictable and consistent environment.

Some participants expressed their enthusiasm for learning and education for their own sake. Lucy was an avid writer and kept journals throughout school. Melanie has changed her career goals based on her experience working with children, planning now to become an educator. "But now, I feel like, working with these kids, I want to be like a teacher, so early

childhood development." Sharon talked about how school satisfied her thirst for knowledge and the exposure to new ideas.

> I love it. I love learning. If I could go to school for free, and just learn as much as I could, and not have to take tests, that would be great. That's what I really want to do is just go to school and learn.

While their motivations differed, all the participants expressed positive feelings about school and education and all expressed their aspirations to do well.

Negative Conduct at School.

Most of the participants displayed more or less severe behavior problems at school, in some cases, starting very young. Melanie felt that she was identified as a troublemaker even before first grade. "I was told many times that I would fail because I had, like, behavior issues since I was in, what, preschool, all the way up to elementary, some intermediate, too." Adriana started getting into trouble shortly after starting school. "I've actually been getting in trouble since kindergarten. Because my first incident was when this boy threw a rock at my eye and I pushed him." The situation escalated when her brother got involved. "And then someone told my brother that I was getting into a fight with a boy, and then my brother ended up fighting with the boy." Adriana also suspected that the teachers at her school began with pre-existing assumptions about her because they knew her older siblings and her family situation. "And we were these so-called trouble kids growing up." Nick recalled exhibiting a consistently oppositional attitude towards teachers at school. "I never wanted to be in school and they didn't want me in school. So they wanted to make it hard on me; I made it hard on them."

A majority of the participants remembered getting into at least one fight at school. Caitlin described a particularly difficult period, when she was coping with feeling abandoned by her birth family. "Like one time I was getting suspended every other week because people wanted to fight me. I was just fighting every other week and I got expelled. I was just like, 'Oh goodness.'" She explained that this was during a particularly tumultuous stage of her time in foster care. "That was my freshman year. My freshman year was a really bad. That was my year where, like, that's where I took out all my frustrations." Nick spoke matter-of-factly about a particularly violent incident involving school personnel.

> This teacher put her hand in my face and I just blew up and stabbed her hand with a pencil. Then she had blood all over my shirt and all I remember is I punched her and ran out of the classroom, ran into another classroom, because I seen security coming after me. Right there a teacher grabbed me and I slammed the door on his hand when he went to grab me. So there was a chair outside, so I grabbed the chair whipped it at the security's leg, and broke his leg. Then I ran home.

In several cases, the negative behavior and violence exhibited by the participants was directly or indirectly related to conditions and occurrences connected to their status in foster care. Adriana described getting into fights when she felt stigmatized and picked on.

> So yeah, I got bullied and that's when I got into fights. I remember people who would tease me about my mom being a drug addict. That kinda hurts, you know? I don't want my mom to be labeled as a drug addict or being from a disrupted family.

Sharon recounted an incident that occurred shortly after witnessing her father's death and first entering foster care. "I remember getting into an argument with my really good friend and she

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yanked on a necklace that my dad had given me. And I just remember attacking her. So it was really hard to get past that."

Several of the participants also reported issues with truancy. In some cases, the participants missed school due to their birth parents' neglect. Melanie described her obligations at home. "So I pretty much missed school a lot from my elementary days, so that I could tend to my siblings. I don't think my parents were like all there, at that time." Adriana was also in the role of taking care of siblings and was essentially abandoned by her birth parents the summer before the start of high school. "But during that summer my mom actually broke up with her boyfriend, and they were using a lot of drugs, and they ended up abandoning us, both of them. So during the summer we took care of ourselves." As a result, not only did she have to assume adult responsibilities at home, but also she simply failed to attend the first months of ninth grade. "So I was taking care of this baby as if she was my own. And by the time ninth-grade came along, I just didn't even go to class at all, for like two quarters."

In other cases, the participants were truant while they were in foster care. Lucy began skipping school after a period of conflict with her foster parents. "I was ditching school; hanging out with my friends all the time. I'd go to the beach instead, that's what we would do." Nick skipped school periodically during middle school and high school. When his mother was incarcerated, he spent much of eleventh grade on Oahu moving from house to house and ultimately wound up living on the streets and not attending school at all. "So I was homeless again. I stayed in a homeless shelter for a little while. Until I came back to Big Island for my 12th grade year." Caitlin missed time in school due to changes of foster placement. She also ran away frequently, and would miss school while on the run. Of one of the schools she attended during high school, she said, "I rarely went." She also missed school to visit the jail while her

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mother was incarcerated. "I missed a lot of school as well, because my mom was incarcerated and visits were mandatory, it was court mandated, and the jail would only allow it during school hours."

Disciplinary Consequences.

Most of the participants had behavior issues during their K-12 schooling that resulted in disciplinary actions including suspension or expulsion. Sharon described a period when she was regularly being disciplined at school for her behavior. "I did get a lot of in-school suspensions in middle school. I don't remember why. It might have been my smart mouth. It was just for a year. I was really in and out of in-school suspension." Nick was disciplined after violent outbursts at school. Adriana described behavior that included shoplifting and escalating violence until the police and the court system became involved as well.

> And then my case just carried on through there; kinda piled up there a little bit, with all my fights and stuff. And then I got into a huge fight right after my teen court was closed, and I got sent to Family Court. So I was like always somehow a part of some type of bad behavior in a way.

Caitlin was expelled from high school for behavior issues and fighting and for a time attended Olomana, an educational program affiliated with the juvenile detention system.

Not all the study participants, however, got into trouble at school that led to disciplinary consequences. Alika recalled that he generally did his work and stayed out of trouble. "No. I was always kind of agreeable. I was just a pretty good kid, I guess." With the exception of a brief period of truancy and poorer grades, Lucy had good behavior throughout school. "I wasn't a bad kid, you know. And it's not like I was out there doing drugs and having sex and all this bad

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stuff." Kawhi recalled that he never had any serious behavior issues. "Just doing normal kid stuff. Staying out of trouble, but just being a naughty kid at the same time."

Some of the school misconduct described by the participants was dangerous, violent, and even criminal. In such cases, disciplinary action by the school was likely appropriate, even necessary to ensure the safety of other students. However, Melanie, Caitlin, Adriana, and Sharon all suggested that their foster care status may have had an influence on the way they were perceived and disciplined at school, even when they were very young. Adriana felt that school personnel made assumptions about her when she first started school in kindergarten, based on the behavior of her older siblings. Melanie felt stigmatized by her first grade teacher who constantly reprimanded her. In sixth grade, Sharon had a teacher who brought juice boxes to sell to the students as a snack. "And so I took the pack, and I handed it out to my friends." Sharon was suspended from school, but the consequences didn't stop there. "Yeah, I got suspended. They took me to the police station. They showed me what the jail cell looked like. And they were like, 'Keep this up; this is where you'll end up.'" Caitlin felt that students in foster care were less likely to be believed by teachers and administrators. "But then like, there's this stereotype where the foster kid is always lying." These incidents and impressions suggest that stigma and preconceptions about students in foster care may have influenced the way they were disciplined for school behavior.

Conversely, given the magnitude of the academic challenges and truancy recounted by some of the participants, it is surprising that none were retained in grade. Adriana, Nick, and Caitlin all missed substantial period of time from school. Adriana recalled that when she returned to school after missing the first semester of ninth grade. "They just waived it. And I just took the classes that I needed to take again. And I started off from there." Adriana suspected that her

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promotion to tenth grade was the result of low academic standards at her school, considering that she had failed to attend nearly half the year. Nick was also allowed to advance after missing school for an extended period of time. His impression was that because he was ahead in credits his failure to attend school didn't have an impact on his progress toward graduation. "The good thing was, I had so much credits, I didn't need to attend my junior year anyway." Caitlin had fallen far behind by her senior year, but was able to make up missed credits to graduate on time. "I did like every program I could. Like, I was taking 20 classes at one time. But I did it. I don't know how." It is impossible to determine exactly what decisions were made by the schools in each of these cases, based solely on the interviews with the participants. However, it is clear that certain accommodations were made to allow these students to make up missed credits and graduate on time despite failed classes and truancy. Perhaps this reflects understanding and compassion on the part of school personnel; perhaps it reflects diminished expectations and a desire to advance sometimes challenging students towards graduation.

School Placement Stability

This section examines the experiences of the participants in relation to school placement stability. All of the study participants except Alika and Lucy changed schools one or more times (in addition to the regular transitions from elementary to middle school or middle school to high school). These changes often correlated to entry into foster care or changes in foster placement. For those who did change schools, especially those who went through multiple changes, there were negative consequences resulting from the changes. Some participants experienced curricular incoherence and academic setbacks due to school placement changes. Even more, participants emphasized the socio-emotional toll of changing schools. Conversely, Kawhi, Alika, Adriana, and Lucy were all able to avoid or resist a school placement change and the opportunity

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to remain in the school they preferred represented a particularly positive chapter in their educational stories.

Several participants in the study went through periods when they changed schools multiple times in the span of a few years. Melanie experienced multiple school changes during elementary school. "I was never stable in an elementary school. I transferred to at least three to five different schools." For Melanie, school placement instability resulted from a combination of unstable and changing living situations for her birth parents and multiple moves in and out of foster care.

> Like wherever I was fostered in, that's the school that I was in. And then my parents
> would take over. It's kind of like I went into care for like a couple years because I think
> my parents got arrested. Then I had to go back to them. So I kept going on and off, on
> and off. And wherever I was at, they would stay there for a little while, but then they
> would have to move to another place.

One of the more stable periods was actually while her birth parents were residing in a homeless shelter. "Intermediate I actually stayed in for like the two years, because we are stationed in a shelter. And that was a good living situation." Not only did the family move around less during this time, but also the shelter rules constrained her birth parents from returning to some of their more destructive behavior patterns. Overall, Melanie changed school repeatedly throughout her K-12 schooling, experiencing only intermittent periods of school stability.

> But this is the first time I actually stayed in a school for the whole year, until I graduated.
> So, I was happy. But for elementary, I went from one side of the coast, to being in the
> center of Oahu, to the other side of the coast. So that was like really different. I mean the

longest that I ever stayed in one place was at least two years, before moving to somewhere else.

Kawhi also changed schools multiple times during elementary school. "From kindergarten to fifth grade I attended different schools, numerous, I think more than I can count on one hand." These school changes mostly resulted from foster placement changes.

Majority of it was when I was in care. So I first entered care when I was in the fourth grade. In fourth grade, end of the year, I think I went to two schools, two different schools. And then after fourth grade I went to four different schools, from fourth to fifth grade.

Kawhi remained stable in one school throughout middle school. He changed schools once in high school, but later was able to remain in his preferred school.

Sharon changed schools in elementary school when she moved from Oahu to the Big Island while she was living with her birth parents. Then when she entered care, she made multiple moves. "I think I went through six different schools throughout my life, mostly in elementary and middle school. But I stayed in one high school thankfully." Her school changes mostly resulted from foster placement changes. Sharon reflected on the challenges she faced with different foster placements. "Some of them were good, some of them were not so good. It became a thing where I was diagnosed with attachment disorder. So I was unable to attach to people. So I'd act out and misbehave." It seems unlikely that multiple school placement changes would have helped with Sharon's difficulty forming stable relationships with peers and adults.

Caitlin also changed schools in elementary school when her birth family moved between Oahu and Kaui. However, most of her school placement changes occurred while she was in care

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in high school. "See alone, just in high school alone, I attended four different schools." These changes resulted mostly from foster placement changes, compounding the challenges she was facing, both in and out of school. "School was especially challenging, because I was constantly moving. There were constant transitions. Which means new foster homes, new people, new rules, new social workers, new GAL. Everything is new and it's overwhelming."

Nick went to the same school throughout elementary school, but attended three different middle schools and two high schools. For most of this time, Nick was living with his birth family or in a kinship foster placement with his older brother and his brother's girlfriend; there were multiple instances of CPS involvement with the family. Nick ostensibly attended junior year of high school on Oahu, although he wound up running away and not attending school for much of the year. He went into care again when he returned to the Big Island, entered a more stable foster placement, and attended a single school for his senior year.

Adriana, Lucy, and Alika were stable through most of their K-12 school experience. When Adriana entered care in ninth grade, she spent the second half of the year at a different high school before moving back to her original high school. Both Lucy and Alika attended just one elementary school, middle school, and high school, even when they entered care.

None of the participants reported delays in registration resulting from school placement changes. This is in contrast to what research shows is common in other parts of the country (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000; Powers & Stotland, 2002). This may be a function of Hawai'i's unique state-wide unitary school district. It is also possible that some delays occurred of which the participants were unaware.

Several participants discussed ways in which curricular incoherence resulting from school placement changes negatively impacted their academic progress. Adriana faced challenges when she moved to a new school, after not attending school at all for several months.

> And you're left to wonder and try to catch up with whatever they're talking about. Like for example with math I hadn't gone to math in a long time and I was placed in that whole algebra, and I had to do Algebra I and Algebra II because I wasn't getting it because I was gone from school for more than six something months. And they want me to be back in it and it's so hard.

Academic achievement in math can be particularly challenging for students who change schools frequently, since the curriculum tends to build on prior knowledge (Kerbow, 1996). Sharon struggled in math in high school after a series of school changes in elementary and middle school. "I feel like I tried my best. I did good in everything else, but it was one of those situations where I felt not smart because I wasn't getting something." Kawhi had difficulty adjusting to different curriculum and learning expectations. "Yeah they were doing something else. Yeah, I was doing different types of reading. How they do their reading; they read books and then they write reports about it. That threw me off. And different kinds of math."

Caitlin and Nick had to make up classes after changing school. Caitlin reported losing credits as a result of school placement changes. "It really is hard because I lost…I lost a lot of credits, like I almost didn't graduate on time. I had to bust my butt senior year." Melanie believed that frequent school changes led her to fall behind academically, which in turn may have led to her being placed in special education. Caitlin believed that school instability impacted the way she studied and prepared for tests. "So, I can cram study and then get full

points on my exam if I study like five minutes before the test. That's what you learn when you are in foster care and you have to move all the time." Uncertainty and instability shaped her approach to school and learning. "You don't know if you're going to be able to take a test or not. Or, if you are going to have to take the test and then go move."

In many ways, however, the study participants felt that the greatest consequence of school placement instability was the social and emotional impact. Kawhi felt out of place when he had to transfer to a school in a different part of Oahu. "A little bit hard. I mean I have never been to Waianae since then. I mean that time, that was my first time there. And I always was nestled in Kalihi, so to come out and experience something different was mind boggling." Changing schools created additional pressure and insecurity for him at a time when he was already subject to disruption and instability in his home life. "And on top of that, deal with being in a new school, losing my parents, being separated from my parents."

Adriana discussed the challenges of trying to fit in to the existing social order at a new school. "It's so small the classes. Which is good, but…. Everybody has their own cliques already over there. So you feel like an outcast, no matter what." Melanie, who made multiple school changes, had a great deal of difficulty forming friendships. "I guess the one thing I really didn't like was not having a friend. You know, you keep moving, the only one that I ever had friend was in Leihoku Elementary School." She felt overwhelmed by frequent school changes. "Moving from place to place. Going into a new school; I didn't really like it, but I had to deal with it. Because then I had to go through that whole entire thing again." Eventually she all but gave up on the prospect of making new friends and instead she tended to isolate herself. "For me, I never did interact with anybody, at all, because I knew I wouldn't stay long enough to be in that school."

Caitlin and Sharon discussed the way they have internalized the lessons they received from the instability they experienced both at home and at school. Caitlin reflected on her perspective on relationships.

> It got to a point where, that was my thing; I push people away, and I got so guarded, and my walls were so high that I just didn't tolerate nobody because I knew they would leave. Because people are temporary, that's my whole thing, people are temporary.

Sharon's experiences led her to develop patterns for dealing with problems that she was just starting to recognize and work to change.

> It created the idea for me that if I ever have a problem, or I don't want to deal with anything, the best way to handle it is to run away. So I felt like that's what I was being taught at an early age.

Many factors in Caitlin's and Sharon's childhoods contributed to the challenges they faced trusting people and forming stable relationships. Yet, school placement instability also tended to reflect and reinforce the chaotic and insecure characteristics of their home lives and personal histories.

All the participants were insistent about the importance of school placement stability and the negative impact of school changes. Kawhi explained the impact on students in foster care. "Like, if you move the kid constantly you're going to mess up his educational stability, and you are going to ruin him, and they probably won't be motivated to continue on in school and they'll fall behind." Lucy described the impact of placement changes on students in foster care, both in terms of foster placements and school placements. "Messes them up! It's instability, that is the biggest, biggest problem, is instability of relationship formation and safety networks."

When the participants did change schools, they reported receiving little or no support from school personnel or social workers in adapting to a new school. Instead they were left to fend for themselves in a new social and academic environment. Kawhi felt that he was on his own when he moved to a new school. "Pretty much sink or swim. I didn't formally meet with a counselor who would guide me through the school and let me know what to do. But fortunately for me I made it through!" Several participants addressed the importance of providing better support for youth in foster care acclimating to new schools. Adriana discussed how this support should include not only an academic component but should also address the social and emotional needs of the youth in foster care.

> I feel like one thing they need to know is don't just drop the kid. Say like, "Take these classes; here you're in a new school and there: boom." There's so much other circumstances, other factors that the children…the child needs to find new friends and it's not easy to be in a new setting and just pick up where you left off, you know what I mean? They need to be more understanding about the different barriers that face foster youth in switching multiple times in school.

The positive value of maintaining school placement stability can be seen in the stories of Alika, Kawhi, Lucy, and Adriana. They identify their successful efforts to maintain school stability as an important element of their educational success. They were all able to stay at a school they preferred at a key juncture during their time in foster care, yielding not only tangible benefits in terms of continuity and support in their school, but also a sense of empowerment and control. For Kawhi, school placement stability played a central role in the positive outcome of his educational experience. "And that's where the success story comes from." Adriana explained that maintaining stability allowed her to avoid what could have been a far more challenging

school experience, with a greater risk of negative results. "Because like I probably could've switched four times. And I wouldn't…my whole life would be scattered."

The participants had a variety of reasons for preferring one school over another. Lucy and Adriana felt the school they preferred offered better educational opportunities. Adriana described how she perceived the differences between the two schools. "I felt like, when I went to [Preferred High School][1], it was more of a prestigious…they were actually challenging you and wanting you to do better." She saw an environment that fostered more academic achievement and positive behaviors. "You don't constantly see people, like, doing drugs there. A lot of the students there are from wealthy families, in a way." Lucy explained that her choice of school was based on educational program as well as the overall school environment. "Not to be biased, but the academic scores at Roosevelt were much higher than Kaimuki. And the violence was much less at Roosevelt than it was at Kaimuki. That is just not something I wanted to get involved in." Adriana perceived a clear difference between her two school choices, one lacking the academic rigor she sought. "I felt like the education was very poor. The teachers didn't care about their students."

School culture mattered to the participants in ways that were not strictly academic, too. Kawhi had a strong connection to his home neighborhood of Kalihi and felt most comfortable going to school there. "When I moved to Farrington, when I transferred actually my junior year, I felt connected. Everyone was cool; welcoming arms. Because originally I'm from Kalihi, and it felt good to be back home." Adriana had a challenging time adjusting to the culture of a new school after a placement change. "So halfway through my freshman year I moved to [Non-

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[1] At the request of the participant, the names of the high schools she attended are omitted from this study.

preferred High School], which is on the west side. Completely whole different type of environment, setting on that side. It's very underdeveloped." Lucy believed that she would have been negatively impacted by the negative school culture if she had been forced to move. "If I had ended up at Kaimuki… Because you know what? I could have gotten in with one wrong group and I could be a crackhead right now. It's just a reality." Kawhi discussed how moving to a new school involved adapting in a variety of ways.

And how they run the school. The whole socioeconomic background of the town. Much different. So that takes on its effect when youth move around in care. Not only do you have to deal with a new school. You have to deal with a new town. Which is much different from the town that they came from.

Several participants discussed their desire to stay close to a supportive peer group and established friends. Lucy had a strong group of long-term friends who had supported her through her mother's death.

I did not want to break the bond with my friends that I had built. We had all gone to the same elementary school, the same middle school, and the same high school and I didn't want to have to start all over.

Alika had difficulty making connections with adults and peers in high school. He reflected on the possible outcomes had a school change severed the ties with the few close friends that he did have.

If I went to Waiakea high school, I don't know where I'd be at. I can't say it wouldn't have been positive, but it could've been detrimental. Because I was already kind of

isolated at Hilo High. So I would've been even more isolated at Waiakea. So having

stability in public schools, or whatever kind of school, primary school, is important.

Kawhi talked about the value and importance of maintaining positive relationships. "I was like, if

I had to move, I'm going to lose all this friendship and then I'm going to have to start all over

again and I didn't want that to happen." Given the social challenges they were already facing as a

result of their foster care status, the participants perceived a real risk to being separated from

their social network. Alika discussed the impact of having a close friend who had similar

aspirations to attend college. "I'm glad I had a friend who already…like his parents wanted him

to go to college." He reflected on how school stability promotes the cultivation of social capital.

"It's tough, but it depends what kind of friends you have, too, or parents, and our parents. So,

yeah and having stability with schools I think it's important and just helping people find really

good friends."

The participants who remained in a preferred school did so as a result of their own

initiative and self-advocacy and the involvement of supportive adults. Alika's foster father

helped him to stay in the high school of his choice after the family moved into another district.

"What I learned is when you're in a different district you can't go to that school. So, I really

wanted to stay in Hilo. So, he sought a district exemption for me and my brothers, and we got it."

Lucy received assistance from a school counselor to pursue a geographic exemption to remain in

her preferred school after she changed foster care placements. Adriana also had to speak up for

herself to prevent additional school placement changes.

I ended up moving back with my dad's parents, but I advocated for myself to stay in the

school I wanted to even though it was way out of the district. They were going to keep

switching schools on me. And I told them, "No! Like, I'm not going to switch schools anymore."

Kawhi viewed maintaining his preferred school placement as a pivotal moment because he was able to advocate on his own behalf, and his opinions were heard and given attention. "So I believe my GAL and my social worker they took me seriously. They took my opinion seriously when I told them I wanted to stay at Farrington and they valued that." For all these participants, the ability to influence the decision to remain in their preferred school demonstrated agency and control.

The participants also expressed pride in the personal effort and sacrifice that remaining in their preferred school entailed. Lucy discussed her morning journey to school, and the commitment on her part that it required.

> So I did my whole junior year walking 25 minutes to the bus stop, getting on a bus, getting on another bus, getting another bus, just to go to school. I mean, I could have took two buses and walk another 20 minutes, but then I would have got to school all sweaty and hot; so take the third bus, you know. Try to get to class and not be a stink ball.

Adriana also shared the story of her school commute and the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment she derived from it.

> In my junior year I had to commute like 45 minutes to an hour to go…to get to school. And I had to catch the county bus and from the county bus I would have to catch another bus, for the school bus, to get on to the school. But if I missed that bus, then the county bus only takes me below the school and I would have to walk all the way up the hill to get to school. So it was a commute that I did for two years.

For these participants, maintaining school stability and the initiative and effort required on their part to effect their desired educational outcome formed an important, positive part of their educational stories.

Adult Supporters of Educational Success and Resilience

This section examines the participants' relationships with key educational supporters and advocates. The presence of a consistent, caring, supportive adult is crucial to promote resilience in any child who has experienced adversity and disruption. The importance is magnified for students in foster care because of the unavailability of birth parents to act as educational supporters and advocates. This section first identifies the characteristics that the participants value in educational supporters. Given that responsibility for the educational success to students in foster care is divides among different classes of adult actors, the rest of the section is organized around those classes: birth parents, foster parents, social service providers, GALs, and teachers and other school personnel. The participants' relationships with each of these classes of actors included both positive relationships and instances when support was limited or unavailable.

As a preliminary matter, I take it as a given that the participants in this study are educationally resilient. The resilience is gauged by the relationship between the severity of adversity faced and the favorability of the outcomes achieved. In other words, to be educationally resilient is to exceed expectations in light of the obstacles to educational success (Luthar, 2006). The participants have, individually and as a group, exceeded any reasonable expectations for their educational success.

During the data collection process, I did not ask specific questions about parental abuse or neglect. This was an intentional decision; in keeping with the frameworks of resilience and narrative theory, I did not believe interviews should be problem-centered. Furthermore, I questioned the ethics of asking these questions, since such stories are linked to pain and trauma, and were only indirectly related to the principle subject of inquiry. Nonetheless, these topics arose during the interviews and the participants shared numerous details about their lives. Their childhoods were marked by instability and trauma, and often involved early exposure to domestic violence, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse, poverty, and homelessness. The participants shared memories that included profound feelings of sorrow, betrayal, guilt, and loss.

Considering both the trauma and adversity experienced by the participants and the educational outcomes for students in foster care as a population, the participants have enjoyed remarkable academic success and far exceeded educational expectations. All the participants graduated from high school. All the participants attended at least some community college. Six completed at least an associate's degree; four completed a bachelor's degree; and at last contact, four were enrolled in or had completed a master's degree program.

An important element of the educational stories of all the participants in the study is a recognition of and appreciation for individuals who supported their educational efforts and achievements. As Nick summed up the recurring theme in the participants' stories, "So, it's all about the right people in your life, I guess." The participants who had achieved the greatest educational success also tended to have the strongest connections to the greatest number of supporters. Alika explained his approach to building social capital, "I'm the type of person I really like to keep those bridges. I like to preserve strong relationships."

Certain patterns emerged in terms of the characteristics of the relationships that the participants found most helpful in promoting educational success and resilience. The participants valued adult supporters who set high educational expectations and demonstrated a strong belief in their potential for success. The participants appreciated adults who listened to their concerns and preferences, engaged them in educational decision-making, and, when appropriate, advocated on their behalf. The participants also placed a particularly high value on adult supporters who provided tangible assistance. In some cases this support was directly related to educational achievement, such as providing tutoring or help applying for scholarships. In other cases, like providing funds to buy a surf board or expediting a court hearing, the connection to education is more indirect, but the act no less impactful. These characteristics are evident, across classes of adult actors, in the relationships that the participants found most supportive.

Birth Families

The experiences and relationships of the participants in the study with their birth parents varied. Two of the participants reported that at least one parent, at times, played a supportive role in relation to education. However for the majority of the participants their parents either played little or no role in school or their influence was more of a hindrance than a support to academic success. The greatest limitations on the ability of birth parents to act as effective educational supporters and advocates were the struggles and adversity they faced in their own lives.

Amongst the participants, only Melanie and Lucy clearly viewed their birth parents as a source of educational support; though in neither case had their birth parents played the role of educationally involved parent in the conventional sense. Melanie felt encouraged and supported by her parents, even though their drug use, homelessness, and incarceration caused instability

and resulted in Melanie transitioning repeatedly in and out of foster care during school. Nonetheless, she felt that her parents supported her education by encouraging her to value education and work hard, even while they were facing their own challenges.

> I guess what I'm trying to say is that my parents was like really the ones that were telling me to do my best in what I do, and they still do that. My teachers, they encourage; but I think my parents is the ones they really did the support. Even though they weren't all there, they were still trying to be good parents, too.

She felt that the support she received from her parents helped to cushion the impact of multiple school moves. "I think because I had a really good support system from my parents, they didn't have to get on me about home work." She viewed her parents as well-educated themselves and felt her father set high expectations for her educational achievement. "Because he doesn't like…my dad is a really good pusher, to have you at least graduate with a high school diploma. And if you want to go to college? Ho, good thing. Good for you, kind of thing." Melanie saw her parents as a primary factor in her educational success.

Lucy's mother was a strong and capable supporter of education when Lucy was young. Her father, on the other hand, has not been a part of her life, struggling with mental illness and addiction, and having a history of domestic abuse and incarceration. After a fire in the family home, her mother had Lucy stay temporarily with a family friend so that Lucy would not need to change schools. "I ended up moving into an apartment with my aunt in Makiki to continue going to Roosevelt High School. I was a freshman. My mom didn't want my grades to be ruined." Even as her mother was dealing with health issues and financial hardship, she wanted Lucy to maintain her focus on education. "I was the last one to graduate high school. She wanted to make

sure that I was going to still be the student that was excelling and that I can play sports." Lucy's mother died suddenly and unexpectedly when Lucy was fourteen. However, her mother's determination to provide the best possible life for her children and her emphasis on the value of education left a lasting impression on Lucy. She identified her mother as a crucial source of motivation. "The biggest thing for high school was I could hear my mom in the back of my head saying things like, 'You have to get good grades. We've got to get you through this.'" More than a decade after her mother's death, Lucy continued to take inspiration from her mother's emphasis on educational achievement. "The fact that she passed away, it motivated me to make sure that her last…our last conversations about school, that I would fulfill that for her."

Kawhi, Sharon, and Alika all had birth parents who were uninvolved in education or their involvement was inconsistent or had an ambiguous impact. Both Sharon's parents were in prison when she was born. Sharon didn't remember meeting her mother until second or third grade. She had irregular contact with her mother until tenth grade when her mother broke off communication. Sharon had a positive relationship with her father during her childhood, but he passed away when she was in third or fourth grade, shortly before she entered foster care. Kawhi viewed his parents' role in education is neither particularly positive nor negative. "They were neutral. They weren't like cheering and encouraging me to continue, but they weren't like, 'You should just drop out.' Neutral." Neither of Alika's parents took an active role in his education. He was never close to his father growing up. And while he had improved his relationship with his mother, she did not provide effective support for education. "I'm close to my mom today, but we're just not at that…she doesn't listen. That's just straight up. That's just her and she's doing okay. But we've never really been…I just can't talk to her about my needs, basically."

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For Nick, Adriana, and Caitlin, interactions with their birth parents made school success, if anything, more challenging. Before entering care, Nick's home life was marked by violence and domestic abuse. "It was always kinda crazy. My mom and my dad used to always fight. I remember waking up to them always fighting." His father passed away when he was young. Nick's mother spent time in jail while he was in school and she provided little or no educational support.

Adriana's father committed suicide when she was three years old. Throughout her K-12 years, her mother battled addiction and cycled in and out of abusive relationships and prison. "It's not like a typical type of family that everything's all good, you have the support from both sides of the parents. Like, I don't really have that." Her interactions with her mother were, if anything, detrimental to her focus on school and education. "My mom would come popping in here and there. And she'd be throwing her 'I need money' tantrums. And it was really scary. And she was always going to jail." Adriana remained connected to other members of her birth family and they applauded her current success, but she did not feel like they had been a positive force when she most needed support. "I remember them saying I'm going to be nothing. Or I'm going to be just like my mom." She was wary of becoming too connected to her birth family, aware that they could have a negative impact on her.

Caitlin's father passed away during her school years. Caitlin's mother struggled with addiction and had been in and out of jail since Caitlin's birth. Caitlin reported that her mother's time in jail had a concrete negative impact on her educational progress because she missed school to visit her mother. Caitlin's relationship with her mother was complex and fraught. She felt that her mother was self-absorbed and had failed to make Caitlin's happiness or success a priority. However, Caitlin tried to maintain a connection with her mother while also maintaining

boundaries. "I love you regardless, because you're my mom, but I'm going to have to love you from a distance at times. Because you stress me the Hell out."

Foster Families

The nature of the participants' foster placements varied, as did their experiences with their foster parents. While some participants maintained a single stable foster placement, other participants experienced multiple placement changes. While some participants were placed with relatives, others were placed with strangers or in group homes. The degree of educational support that the participants received from their foster parents also varied greatly. Two of the participants credited their foster parents as key educational supporters. However, most of the participants saw their foster parents as having a negligible or even negative impact on their educational success. In some cases the participants believed that the effectiveness of their foster parents as educational supporters and advocates was limited by their language skills or educational background. However, several participants felt that their educational success was simply not a high priority for their foster parents.

Only Alika and Kawhi had strongly positive impressions of the educational support they received from a foster parent. Alika had one stable foster placement throughout his time in care and felt that he received encouragement and tangible support from his foster father. "It was really good. I really had a good foster dad. And I think that made a really big difference." His foster father had clear rules and routines in the household. "He was very caring. He was strict, but he was awesome." His foster father was also instrumental in supporting Alika's preference to remain in the same high school after his foster father moved closer to another school. His foster father collaborated with Alika's social worker to arrange a geographic exemption and also drove

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Alika to and from school each day. His stepfather also supported him participating in other activities at school. "He would let me do sports, so I did wrestling, judo, and I was a part of the Leo Club." Alika felt that his foster father succeeded in minimizing some of the negative impacts of foster care. "So I really commend him for that. He really bent backwards to ensure that we...help us have a pretty normal life, you know."

Kawhi moved through several foster placements, including spending time in a group home. While he was in the group home, his school performance and attendance were closely monitored. Kawhi felt strongly supported to achieve academically in his last foster placement. He thought of his foster parents as well educated; they had both earned their bachelor's degrees. He was grateful that his foster parents placed a strong emphasis on academic success. "They wanted me to go to school, and education was important to them. It was their first priority, and that fire helped me to graduate." They also provided practical support, helping him to apply for loans and to research other financial resources for college.

Sharon was placed in multiple foster homes with mixed results. "Some of them were good; some of them were not so good." Because she was having particular trouble forming attachments and maintaining a stable placement, she was placed in a trial program where she rotated between three different families, though ultimately she settled into spending most of her time with one family. The families collaborated to set expectations for school performance and for her to attend afterschool tutoring. She definitely had structure and expectations around school. However, Sharon felt like her foster families didn't empathize with the struggles she was having with some of her school work, especially math. "And I didn't know how else to get past it. It was one of those situations where I felt not smart because I wasn't getting something. And they made me feel that way." Sharon's strongest emotional ties were with one of her early foster

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families from whose home she was removed. "Even after I left their home they told me they're still mom and dad. Until this day, they are my mom and dad." Sharon viewed these former foster parents as an ongoing source of support. "They said if you are doing your best and that's all you know you can give, then that's all you can give. You can't do more than you are already trying to do." She felt like they provided empathic encouragement for her education, "That helped a lot, because I didn't feel like I was pressured to be more than I already am."

Adriana and Nick were both placed in relative foster care. In both cases their caregivers were ill-equipped to actively support academic achievement. Nick was placed in relative care with his hanai brother, although his brother's girlfriend was officially acting as legal guardian. Nick's brother and girlfriend were only about six years older than Nick. Their involvement with and support for education was minimal.

Adriana alternated between foster placements with her maternal and paternal grandparents. She recalled that her grandparents were generally supportive and encouraged her to do well. However, she felt they lacked the predisposition and the capacity to support educational attainment in practical ways. "My grandma, my mom's mom, she's full Filipina, where she doesn't really understand anything. She can't help you out, at all. And in a way it's just not like a part of them to help you with your education." To the extent that her foster parents got involved in school, it was typically in reactions to academic and behavior problems at school. "I wouldn't say that they were really involved actually aside the time they had to go into the office and discuss how bad I am. Like, it's never about when I'm doing good."

Lucy's relationship with her foster parents was complex. After her mother passed away, DHS attempted to place her with her brother; unfortunately, her brother was arrested for unpaid

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speeding tickets. Lucy preferred to stay with a family friend who had taken Lucy in after her mother's death; however this option also fell through. Lucy was ultimately placed with the youth pastor of her church, who she knew primarily because he coached her on the church volleyball team. Although her foster parents provided for her material needs and provided a safe and stable environment, Lucy felt stifled by their rules and underappreciated for her accomplishments, "It was just wrong in their eyes, all of it." The relationship continued to deteriorate after Lucy's foster parents had their own children. "It was so bad, I would say, when we took Christmas photos, there were pictures with me and pictures without me. As if I wasn't part of the family." When her relationship with her foster parents soured, Lucy felt that it negatively impacted her grades.

Both Melanie and Caitlin were placed with numerous foster parents, none of whom they recalled taking a positive, supportive role in their education. Melanie and Caitlin, like some of the other participants, felt that foster parents treated the children and youth they fostered differently than they treated their biological children. Caitlin felt that foster parents were unwilling to provide the same level of educational support for foster youth. "They won't educate…they won't do what they would do for their bio kids, and it sucks." Melanie felt like she was held to lower standards and expectations. "Yeah, I mean foster parents are strict parents, but only to their own kid." Melanie noted how the lack of involvement by her foster parents reinforced her sense of otherness and isolation at school. "I would never go to open house. I think that was one of the things; everybody would go for open house. I'd be like the one that says, 'No.' So, I never have that school experience either."

A common theme for several of the participants was that foster parents were reluctant to support the participants at school if it involved additional effort or expense on their part. Lucy

spent hours each day commuting by bus because her foster parents did not drive her to school. Melanie recalled that she had to take the initiative if she needed anything to complete an assignment or project at school.

> Not once did my foster parents ask me if I ever had homework to do. If I wanted to do homework, I had to ask her. I had to tell her to go on the computer, go on anything that I needed, tell her what I needed, but I would still have issues with that. So everything that I needed, I would have to try and get it for myself because if I asked her, she would say, 'I don't know if I can do that.' So that was basically a no.

Nick believed that foster parents were unlikely to make the effort to even ensure that foster youth attended school. "But if the youth doesn't want to go to school, I notice that foster parents don't really care. They're just like, 'You don't want to go to school? Whatever, stay home.'"

Melanie, Sharon, Caitlin, and Kawhi felt that their opportunity to participate in sports and other activities was limited by a lack of resources and support from their foster parents. Melanie participated in several sports, but did so despite the lack of support from her foster parents. She did her own fundraising and had to arrange her own transportation. "I had to think of ways to get there and get back. Like if it was during the day, I would catch the bus, take all my stuff on the bus. But finding a way back home was the hardest part." Kawhi was reluctant to even ask his foster family about participation in sports. "I just felt that my foster parents wouldn't make that time and effort to be supportive of me doing sports. Like pick me up late if we finish late, or anything like that. Doing transportation."

Sharon and Caitlin had the experience of participation in sports and other activities being conditioned on behavior and academic performance. Sharon loved playing basketball, but she

ultimately gave up on her hope of playing in high school. Her foster families made participation contingent on school performance. "So the deal was if I didn't do good in school, I couldn't do basketball. So I never got to do basketball, because I never could do well in math." Caitlin reported that her foster mother discouraged her from participating in softball, among other activities. "I was dancing for a little while and stuff like that. So she made me quit that. She made me quit soccer and she made me quit hula." Caitlin believed that preventing participation in activities was counterproductive. "So, I was just like, dude, that is just keeping me away…that's what keeps me away from my shitty reality. And you just take that all away from me."

Several participants felt that the level of financial and material support for school and education they received from their foster parents was disappointing, considering that foster parents receive money from the state to help them pay the costs for youth in their care and that there are additional resources available for extracurricular activities. Melanie felt like her foster parents could have done more to support her interest in sports. "I was told that I wouldn't be able to get any kind of sportswear. Not unless I come up with the money on my own. I don't think she even bothered to tell my social worker." Lucy got part-time jobs throughout high school in order to pay for school expenses. "I didn't know that they were getting paid by the state to take care of me." Caitlin also got a part time job while she was in school and felt like it impacted her school performance. She resented the fact that her foster parents were paid, and she felt like they did not provide her with the financial support she needed. "Because honestly they don't feed me, they don't do this, they don't do that. I'm doing it myself. Or I'm going to my family for it. So why are they getting paid?" In Lucy's case, her foster parents actually tried to recoup some of their expenses for her care. After Lucy aged out of foster care, her foster parents asked her to dinner.

"I went to this restaurant with them and had dinner. At the end of dinner they passed me a paper. Basically on the paper was all these things they had bought for me, all calculated. What I owed them."

It is impossible to ascertain the accuracy of each of these stories. Regardless of whether these foster parents used the foster payments they received appropriately, the study participants were left with the impression that their educational and extracurricular activities were not highly valued. And by extension, they felt undervalued themselves.

Social Service Providers

Social service providers played a very important role in supporting and advocating for the educational success of the participants. Three of the participants saw their case managers as key educational supporters. The participants also developed relationships with social service professionals working through a variety of governmental and non-profit programs including: Independent Living Program workers; Epic 'Ohana Youth Circle facilitators; staff and mentors at the Susannah Wesley Community Center; mentors and tutors for Upward Bound; adult leaders of the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition and the HI H.O.P.E.S. Board, and the Boys & Girls Club staff. All the participants identified at least one social service provider whose support and advocacy was essential. However, several of the participants felt that their case manager failed to provide adequate support for educational success. Some participants saw large caseloads and high worker turnover as limitations on the effectiveness of case managers as educational supporters. However, the participants also felt that some case managers failed to prioritize education.

Alika, Kawhi and Adriana had the most positive impressions of their case managers and the role they had played in supporting education. Kawhi appreciated that his case manager asked for his input and took his opinions seriously. "Yeah, she would check up on me occasionally. Ask how I'm doing. And just listen to what I had to say, not just shrug it off." The support of his case manager became particularly important for Kawhi to successfully resist a school placement change and remain at his preferred school.

Adriana had both positive and negative experiences with case managers. She described her initially negative reaction to a new case manager. "I got this really hardcore strict head overseer supervisor manager that was like…that was like the only person ever, there was nobody after her. I hated her, and every time we meet she would make me cry." Over time, however, her feelings evolved into appreciation and gratitude. "She never gave up on me. She saw something in me that I didn't see."

Alika recalled simple acts of kindness by his case manager that left a lasting impression. "He was always friendly. Once in a while I'd see him. I had lunch with him once. I can't really complain to this day." Alika appreciated his case manager's willingness to support him, even in matters not directly related to academics. Getting a driver's license can be a challenge for some foster students, but it can also be an important step towards independence and adulthood. Alika's case manager let him borrow his own car to take the road test for a driver's license. "To be honest he wasn't allowed, I think. But that was just the coolest thing. So I actually passed my test, my driver test first with his car. That was just incredible of him. We got kinda close." The participants felt the most supported by case managers who took tangible steps to support their goals, academic and otherwise.

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Several of the participants had a negative view of their case managers. These participants reported that their case managers provided little or no support for education. Nick dismissed the role of case managers in his education. "Social workers only show up if they need something. They are supposed to have monthly meetings with their youth, but it never happens. I've probably only seen my worker whenever I went to the office for something." Melanie also felt like her case workers were barely present. "Back on Oahu, I never knew I even had any caseworkers." As a result, she had no one to explain what to expect while she was in foster care or how her child welfare case might progress. Even when she did see her case workers, they were not involved in her education. "Since elementary all the way up to today. I did see the caseworker in high school, but it was like months on end, never do see her. Leave her a voicemail hopefully she gets back, hopefully not." Caitlin also shared her impression that her case workers failed to take an active interest in her wellbeing, in or out of school. "My social workers, they often disappeared. I could have been dead and they wouldn't even know."

Several participants felt that education simply wasn't a priority for their case managers. Lucy recalled that that her social worker would periodically visit her school, but that the social worker's engagement was minimal. "And it was just basically a temperature check. It wasn't anything long or strenuous. But I would get called to the counselor's office, we would talk for about fifteen or twenty minutes, and then they would leave." Melanie had a similar impression of the interactions she had when she did see her case manager. "Every three months they would come visit and ask me how I'm doing in school. And nothing. They would ask me how I'm doing in school and I'd say fine; okay move on the next subject kind of thing." These interactions with case managers created the impression that education was a low priority.

The participants' stories about their case managers contain references to commonly identified factors that can interfere with a case manager's ability to effectively support students in foster care. Sharon recognized that her case managers struggled under extremely heavy caseloads, but she was unsatisfied with this explanation. "What I heard was, 'Oh, I have so many cases and there's only one of me.' And I'm like, okay, how is that my fault. That doesn't help me. Am I not important as I thought?" Another challenge is a high rate of turnover among case managers. Lucy discussed the impact this had on the relationships she formed with her case managers. "During my process with the Child Welfare System I also went through, I think, about four or five social workers during this time. I can't even name all of them because that's how often they changed." Sharon, likewise, had multiple social workers manage her case. "I don't remember, I went through at least four or five or six social workers between my time in care." Adriana reflected on the importance of consistency in order for case managers to effectively support education for students in foster care.

> The consistency is like the most important especially with workers. If there's a worker they can stick with them and talk about their education it's just better than having multiple different people who are asking about your education. And you're wondering, "OK, who am I talking with now."

Regardless of the reasons, the degree to which their case managers prioritized education impacted the participants.

There are a number of other social workers and social service professionals, besides individual case managers, who may interact with foster youth. These professionals may have specialized roles within DHS, or they may work with outside nonprofits and other organizations

who work with the state to provide services to children and youth in foster care. The participants tended to view social service providers other than their case managers more positively and more likely to provide tangible support for education.

All the participants except Lucy were involved with the Hawaiʻi Foster Youth Coalition (HFYC), the HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leader Boards (HI HOPES), or both. All the participants who were involved spoke very positively of their experiences with these organizations and identified the adults at the organizations as key supporters. These two organizations shared somewhat similar missions and roles; both seek to empower foster youth in their late teens and early twenties to become leaders and advocates (Hawaiʻi Foster Youth Coalition, (n.d.); HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative, 2018). Alika talked about his close connection with a mentor from HFYC. "She really did treat us like her kids in a way." Sharon also recalled receiving both tangible help and encouragement from a HFYC mentor. "So she helped me a lot in looking at scholarships or submitting my FAFSA and stuff like that. It was really nice. I feel like I was supported a lot." Adriana's long term involvement with HFYC led to her getting a job with the organization and helping other youth in foster care.

Another program through which the participants connected with adults who provided meaningful support was the Independent Living Program (ILP). The goal of the program is to provide resources and build the capacity of youth transitioning out of foster care. Kawhi, Alika, Adriana, and Lucy all spoke positively about assistance they received through the program. Adriana talked about one ILP social worker who left a particularly lasting impact.

Like, nobody was sitting down with me and doing that. Not my grandma; not my mom. A

caseworker, some stranger, is willing to make me plan out what's going to happen next.

That's what made me realize that, "Oh, I need to do good in school."

The participants spoke about getting help from their ILP social worker with specific tasks, like

applying for grants and filling out financial aid paperwork. They also felt supported in setting

goals and planning for their future.

Another organization mentioned by several participants is EPIC Ohana Conferencing.

EPIC is a non-profit that contracts with DHS to provide services to foster youth and their

families. One of the services EPIC provides is Youth Circles. A Youth Circle is a facilitated

group process designed to help foster youth set goals and identify needs and resources in

preparation for independent living. When a youth convenes a Youth Circle, he or she can invite

any supporters including family members, foster families, and service providers to come together

and map out tangible steps to help the youth achieve his or her goals.

Lucy, Kawhi, Alika, Sharon, and Caitlin all mentioned convening Youth Circles, and

they all spoke positively about the role the Circles played in marshalling support and resources.

Lucy was so enthusiastic about Youth Circles that she hoped to be a facilitator for Youth Circles

one day. "So the Youth Circles are very empowering for me. It's my dream job." She had hoped

the Circle might improve her relationship with her foster parents, but that did not happen.

However, she felt that the Circle provided a venue for her biological family, normally not very

emotionally forthcoming, to directly express their support for her and their pride in her

accomplishments. "But then when you're in the meeting, they're like, 'She's strong, and she's

independent, and she's a role model.' And so when you hear those things you're like, 'You don't

say these things to me, but I love it!'"

Alika convened multiple Youth Circles that were composed primarily of social service

providers with whom he had close connections. "I had always at least 7 to 10 people. The

majority was really just adult supporters. I barely had family there. You know, I have family on

the island, but I'm just not really close with most of them." The support and guidance he received

from these social service professionals helped to compensate for the lack of a strong family

network. Sharon's Youth Circle helped her to learn more about educational and career options

after foster care. "All I know is I want to be able to give back to people. It did help; the Circle

did help a little, just to, like, open my eyes to my other options out there." Kawhi felt that his

Youth Circle helped him coordinate assistance and resources to help find scholarships and

financial aid to pay for college.

A few of the participants also connected to adult supporters through other government

and nonprofit organizations providing services to children and youth in foster care. Melanie had

a very strong connection to the Boys and Girls Club. The program offered her an afterschool

environment that felt safe and supportive. "It was really good. It really created a second home for

me. It was a really good program. It didn't seem like a program, because I felt like a second

home kind of thing. It kinda really hit close." At the end of Melanie's sophomore year, the staff

at the Boys and Girls Club intervened to soften and humanize what must have been a disruptive

and emotionally-charged event, when the police came to take her and her brother into foster care.

> Something happened with my parents. Cops showed up at the house. They ended up
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> coming down to the Boys and Girls Club. And the Boys and Girls Club kinda got

protective about it. Took the cops in, then they brought us in, me and my brother, and told us that we'd be taken away from our parents.

The Boys and Girls Club also helped Melanie get school supplies and equipment she needed to allow her to participate in sports, supporting her in ways her foster family did not. "Here comes Boys and Girls Club. Hey, do you need shoes? Yeah I do; can I have? So the Boys and Girls Club came in again and they gave me what I needed. They were there all the way."

Kawhi became involved with the Susanna Wesley Center, a community based center that offers programs and where, he explained, he would, "Just go there after school, make friends, hangout, shoot hoops, play pool. And eventually I was paired with a mentor, or mentors, which was helpful." Kawhi received important support from two of his mentors. Of the first he recalled, "He was crucial for most of my high school years. And I talked to him about college, about what it's like graduating high school, and the real world. We hung out; he was like a big brother to me." After the first mentor left, Kawhi was paired with another mentor who also provided support for educational success. "I didn't work with him until maybe a month before I graduated because [the first mentor] had to leave. And then he was pivotal for me, not only me graduating, but in continuing on to college."

Sharon received additional support for education through the Upward Bound Program. Upward Bound provides academic support and college readiness services to low income and first generation students. The program sent tutors to her school, from whom she received direct academic support as well as a sense of connection. "And usually they're college kids, so they can relate to us. So that was really nice. A lot of the tutors tried to help me as much as they could. But mostly it was just math." Sharon was able to form emotionally supportive connections with

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the young adult mentors she met through the program. "My Upward Bound advisors were really supportive. They understood where we came from and a lot of them knew my background, because I told them. So they helped me as much as they could and they supported me." She felt that she was able to form closer bonds with the mentors not only because they were relatively close in age, but also because they already knew she was in foster care.

The participants with strong connections with service providers emphasized how much motivation they derived from these supporters. Their encouragement and belief in the participants' potential to succeed enhanced the participants' own self-confidence. This may explain why a majority of the participants were pursuing careers in social work. Kawhi talked about how much he appreciated being listened to and having his opinion valued. Alika saw service providers as the foundation of his social capital and educational support system. "I really looked up to all the supporters that I had and a lot of them were like social workers and service providers and whatnot." Adriana talked about how she was inspired to live up to the faith and confidence that had been placed in her by multiple service providers. "It was just a collaboration of all that that actually really helped me and motivated me to become successful. And I didn't want to let any of them down, honestly."

Guardians Ad Litem

The nature of their relationships with their GALs starkly divided the participants. Several participants felt strongly that their GALs were among their most important sources of support and advocacy for educational success. These participants appreciated that their GALs solicited and valued their input and advocated on their behalf. However, half the participants reported

having little or no contact with their GALs; in fact, several professed to being unaware that they even had a GAL.

Lucy felt that her GAL listened to her opinions and paid attention to her preferences. "I had actually two GALs. One of them, if there's anybody who I really appreciate it was her. Because she really sat down and really asked me a lot of in depth questions and really cared about me." Lucy recalled that her GAL also took the time to explain what was going on with her family court case. "She was really nice and she would always inform me on what was going to happen, and who was involved, and I would always get a copy of the paperwork of whatever was going on. Which is good!" Lucy also explained that her GAL understood how uncomfortable and unpleasant it was for Lucy to go to court. Her GAL would ensure that she could get in and out as quickly as possible, and that she made it back to school.

Adriana's GAL also advocated for her to remain in her preferred school, despite her uneven record of behavior and academic performance. Without the support of her GAL, she did not believe her preferences would have been taken seriously. "The court system would never let me go to a different school out of my district and commute. They would say that that girl's not dedicated enough: look at her truancies, and run aways, and ditching school." The support of her GAL at this key juncture had a profound impact on Adriana, helping her to feel valued and appreciated. "Because she advocated for me, and because she…no matter how bad I was doing, she never turned her back on me or looked at me any wrong. And I like loved her so much."

Kawhi reported that his GAL, in coordination with his social worker, was instrumental in helping him remain in his preferred school. For Kawhi, this support had an impact beyond simply maintaining school stability. "Because he wanted me to do well and I believe he saw

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potential in me. And that's great. Being in care, youth don't usually have that supportive adult they can turn to and help motivate them."

These stories are in sharp contrast to the experiences of the other participants, who had little or no relationship with their GALs. Sharon said, "I don't think I had one. Maybe I had one, but I don't remember their names. Because all I usually had was social workers." Melanie reported, "No. At that time I never even knew that I had one." And Nick said, "I never knew what was a GAL until I joined HI H.O.P.E.S." Alika knew he had a GAL, but did not feel like she was particularly involved with his education. "She was a nice person. It's just for whatever reason we weren't close. She didn't visit me a lot."

Teachers and Other School Personnel

The participants in the study discussed their interactions and relationships with their teachers, as well as a variety of other school personnel including counselors, administrators, and coaches. Many of the participants identified at least one relationship with an adult at school that was positive and supportive. However, more of the participants identified social service providers than classroom teachers as educational supporters. And more of the participants saw GALs as key advocates for their educational interests. Lack of knowledge and information may contribute to the fact that classroom teachers are less frequently identified as effective supporters and advocates. Unlike child welfare and court personnel, teachers and other school personnel may be unaware that a student is in foster care. The participants suggest that lack of knowledge and information may also contribute to less supportive relationships in two ways. Some of the participants felt that most of their teachers were unaware they were in foster care, and this

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limited the connection. Several participants also felt stigmatized by teachers whose preconceived notions about students in foster care may have impacted their attitudes.

Lucy and Adriana had the most positive connections with the greatest number of teachers and other school personnel. Lucy had clear memories of several teachers who played an important role for her in high school. "Isn't it crazy that I remember their names? It's been seven years." She felt like these teachers set high standards for her academic work and also formed a personal bond with her. All the teachers she was close with knew about her background and that she was in foster care. "They knew what was going on; they knew how to communicate with me; and they also were very empowering to me." She felt encouraged to express herself and share her story through her writing. She also had a school counselor who knew about her foster status and helped her apply for a geographic exemption in order to remain at her preferred school.

Adriana had mixed feelings about the way she was treated by her teachers and other school personnel, especially in elementary school. Because she grew up in a small community on Kauai, she felt like she was stigmatized because school personnel know her family and had experience with her brothers. She felt like she struggled to differentiate herself. "No, I don't act like my brother. I'm my own different person." However, Adriana also felt like she received strong support from other school personnel who understood her situation. She had one school counselor who worked with her all the way from sixth grade until high school graduation. "Which was really good, because she already knew us, she already knew who we were, our circumstances." This counselor had a lasting impact not only because of the tangible support and guidance she provided, but also because of her evident concern for the students.

When it came to applying for scholarships and stuff and talking about how to get on the right path to graduate from high school, she helped me. Because I wouldn't know which classes to take or how much credits I'm behind. I was really lucky to have her because she actually really cared about students.

Adriana also felt supported and encouraged by her paddling coach and by her principal. She saw her principal as a supportive adult even though Adriana had a history of getting in trouble. "You know she was really hard on me, and yet she believed in me." She appreciated the interest the principal took in her wellbeing. "She would give me like those pep talks, not to make me feel bad, but just to make me choose the right thing. And nobody really gives me those kinds of talks." Her paddling coach recognized her efforts with an end of the year award. This was particularly meaningful to her. "It felt actually really good to do something good."

Nick's interactions with school personnel were at times characterized by conflict and even physical violence. He recounted a time when a teacher held a pair of scissors to his throat and threatened him. However, he also shared several positive stories about teachers who he referred to by name (which only three of the participants did). He mentioned one teacher who formed a positive relationship with him over time. "That year she had a hard time with me. The following year she came back, and she would work one-on-one with me and everyone. She would incorporate more hands-on projects. She tried to be more understanding."

Nick's strongest connection was to his special education teacher and with a counselor who helped him work through his issues with anger management. He mentioned that he still stayed in touch with the counselor. "He was always there for me and whatnot when I needed him. Like he always calls me and asks me to come talk to his kids for some reason." Nick felt

that his special education teacher was effective because he tailored the class around the interests of the students. Nick felt that going into that classroom was the "best thing that ever happened." Nick's teacher and counselor not only knew that Nick was in foster care, but shared information about him with each other and mediated his relationships with other teachers.

Kawhi relationships with teachers evolved significantly between elementary and high school. One difference was that over time he became less ashamed of his family situation. He kept his foster status secret in elementary school. "Because back then for me, when I was younger, it was harder to deal with that." However, his experience was different in high school, when he became more comfortable and more of his teachers knew about his foster care status. "I think in high school they were more supportive. I guess because I was a little bit more open with it, and more willing to work with it." When he was living in Hale Kipa, a group home, he had to confirm his attendance each day. "So I had to tell them, 'Hey, I'm in a shelter. I'm in foster care. Could you sign this every day?' So just having teachers checking on me, seeing how I'm doing, really helped." He also developed a supportive relationship with a counselor. "I had a counselor in high school. She knew about my situation and she would check up on me and basically see how I was doing."

Melanie had mixed experiences with her teachers. Her perspective was influenced by her belief that she may have been inappropriately identified for special education. Asked if she thought she had been stereotyped based on her poverty and behavior, she was uncertain but suspicious. "I don't know. I honestly don't know. It's sad that they would be, looking back. I really thought that they did." However, she did have some positive experiences with teachers when she was attending school on Maui, where she stayed at the same school for first and second grade. She felt like these teachers actually helped her learn. "Being supportive and actually

helping me do it alone; that really helped." However, she also had experiences with teachers who did not seem to take an interest in her success. "But back on Oahu I don't know that much teachers that was supportive."

Melanie did not talk to people at school about her foster care status. However, she did tell her basketball coach, in order to explain why she was not receiving more parental support. "Yeah. I had to explain it to her in order for her to understand where I was coming from. Tell her why I couldn't be doing this." Melanie felt like her coach was supportive, once she understood Melanie's situation. "Yeah she was. She just told me to try my best, try to fundraise my own money."

Alika, Sharon, and Caitlin had little or nothing positive to say about the involvement of school personnel in their educational success. Alika never developed relationships with his teachers in high school. "I just didn't get too close to most of my teachers. I wasn't like super depressed but I didn't always smile and stuff." He found it easier to connect with his social workers who were aware of his situation in foster care. "I did feel more close to my service providers and social workers. I got close with them."

Sharon did not report that any teachers stood out as supporters. She was reluctant to talk to her teachers about her situation. "No, no. I didn't share with a lot of people, with my teachers at all. No. I didn't really confide in anybody, except those people who already knew." She shared a story about a meeting between her social worker and her teachers. "And I guess we were just all talking about the situation that I was in. And my teachers were like, 'Really? We never can tell that you were in foster care or anything like that.' The reaction suggests the teachers may have had assumptions about what foster youth are like and that Sharon didn't fit the stereotype.

I don't know what signs that they look for when they're trying to describe somebody who's been in foster care. So I guess I was just like, 'Oh yeah, that's who I am, I guess.' And there is a really interesting thing…. When I heard that, I was just like, I don't know how they are supposed to act.

Caitlin also felt unsupported by the school personnel with whom she interacted. She recalled meeting with a school counselor who wanted her to talk about her problems, but whom she felt lacked empathy for the depth of the trauma she had experienced. "So I wouldn't talk in most of my sessions because I wasn't ready to. I'm not going to open up the wounds when I'm not ready to deal with them or process them." She also felt that after falling behind, she was actively discouraged by school personnel. "Because they were telling me, 'There's no way you can graduate.'"

Several of the participants spoke about the importance of school personnel having more knowledge and information about students in foster care. Kawhi explained how school personnel may not understand behavior when they do not understand the context. "I think that's what a lot of school people need to understand. That there is much more to a kid being disruptive in class. There's underlying issues and trauma going on." Nick also thought that better understanding was one of the most important elements for improving education for youth in foster care.

Because if they don't know, if the teacher or the counselor doesn't know where that youth is coming from, they will never get help. And the only person that usually tells the counselor or the faculty or anything would be the youth.

Narratives of Educational Success and Resilience

This section examines the narrative themes present in the educational stories of the participants. In terms of the substance of the interviews, certain key themes emerged that tended to frame these stories as narratives of educational resilience. The participants had a generally positive and optimistic outlook: they felt supported, fortunate, and inspired. The participants recognized their agency over their own choices and actions. They recognized their power to make changes in the world, in their social environment, and in themselves. At the same time, they held themselves blameless for the past events in their lives that had been beyond their control. They were self-reliant and proud of their ability to sacrifice and work hard for what they wanted. The participants were future oriented, setting educational, personal, and professional goals and developing plans to accomplish these goals. In meeting these goals they saw themselves breaking the negative cycles repeated within their families and living lives more satisfying and successful than their birth parents. In addition, the participants expressed their desire to serve their communities, and especially to support foster youth with stories and backgrounds similar to their own. Perhaps most powerfully, as the participants weathered adversity with resiliency, they embraced the reintegrative process by which even difficult and negative events helped to shape them into the resilient and successful people they had become. This section first addresses the identity of the members of the case as purposeful narrators of their own stories. The rest of the section presents findings related to the narrative themes that emerged from the participants stories: positivity and optimism; agency and empowerment; future focus and goal setting; and resilient reintegration.

Participants as Purposeful Narrators

Before discussing the patterns and themes that emerged from the content of the participants' narratives, it is important to note how the narratives also demonstrated the experience and intentionality of the participants as storytellers. Several of the participants seemed very conscious of their roles as narrators of their own stories. Asked to discuss his education, Nick provided what served as the framing simile for the entire conversation.

> So before school, it actually, it starts from the household. So if you don't have a stable household you may not be able to go to school, because it is all about structure. It's like construction. You have to have a stable foundation to even go somewhere in life. And without that everything just crumbles apart.

Melanie stepped out of her description of her education to make sure her story was in line with the purpose of the interview. "That's just the beginning of the story, but I didn't know how in depth this would go." Kawhi explicitly identified what might be considered the dramatic turning point of his own educational narrative. Lucy acknowledged her role as modern day Scheherazade while simultaneously drawing the interviewer's attention to the story at hand. "I have a story for you. I've got millions of stories, but this one is very interesting, relating to my father." Lucy was particularly aware of her eperiences as a story, repeatedly referring to some of the improbable narrative elements of her story and to her intention to ultimately commit it to the page. "Crazy, right? This is why I'm writing a book about my life. It's gonna be a crazy one. That's only half the stories. Any questions?"

All the participants had previously shared their stories in different settings and for a variety of different audiences. Lucy, Adriana, Kawhi, Alika, Caitlin, and Melanie had all

counseled and advised younger siblings and other members of their family by sharing their own experiences in foster care. Alika explained how he tries to help his younger brothers, using his own example to guide and inspire. "I'm always trying to talk with them, 'When you want to apply to college, talk to me. Because it's tough.'" Lucy explained how she consciously tailors the story she shares with her nephews to overcome their reluctance to pursue college.

> They're just trying to get out of high school. But I'm like pitching it a different way, to sort of set them up for success and let them know like, 'You can get money, just for going to school.' And they're like, 'What?' And I'm like, yes, found my way in!

All the participants with the exception of Lucy purposefully shared their stories through their involvement with either HI HOPES, HFYC or both. Alika, Sharon, Adriana, Caitlin, and Kawhi were all involved with the HFYC. Alika, Kawhi, Sharon, Nick, Caitlin, and Melanie were all part of HI HOPES. Both organizations encouraged and helped to prepare participants to share their stories to inform stakeholders, to advocate for policy changes, and to connect with and inspire children and youth currently and formerly in foster care (Hawai'i Foster Youth Coalition, (n.d.); HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative, 2018). Caitlin explained how nervous she would get before speaking in public, but that encouragement from an adult mentor helped her overcome her fears. "She kinda just told me to get the hell over it. I was like, 'Okay, I will.' She gives me the eye and I was just like, 'Yes, okay.'" HI HOPES provided explicit training to all board members in "Strategic Sharing". The training emphasized safety and cautioned youth about sharing their story in ways that risked retraumatizing themselves or others. The training affirmed the intrinsic value of the experiences they had lived and the importance of not allowing others to assume control of the narrative. Twice a year, HI HOPES held a youth leadership institute where the use of personal narrative for empowerment and advocacy was explored through a workshop called

"Your Story; Your Life" (D. Ulima, personal communication, Nov. 28, 2017). Because of their involvement with these organizations, the participants had shared their stories repeatedly at public events, conferences, and on panels. The purposes of sharing their stories in these contexts included education, advocacy, and inspiration, and the participants had experience shaping and retelling their personal narrative with a specific purpose in mind.

Positive and Optimistic Outlook

Taken together, the narratives of the participants contained considerably more optimistic and positive statements than negative or pessimistic ones. This is true despite the trauma and adversity experienced by all the participants. Nick shared his attitude toward challenges. "Me, I always thought of the cup as half full. Because you have to think about the good things in life." Melanie said, "I think optimistic is what I go for." Lucy's perspective was also optimistic and upbeat. "I'm very fortunate; the life I have is what people dream of. But a lot of it is been like luck and fate and things I can't control." Even Caitlin, whose narrative contained more negative statements than positive statements, continued to strive to see the good in the world.

> I'm very negative because of the fact of my dark past, and that has been really a struggle for me personally. But no matter through the setbacks I've had, I've always, I've always…well now I see through it. There's always light at the end of the tunnel. That's what I tell everybody. There's always a light at the end of the tunnel. Even though the tunnel might be long, you're going to get there someday.

One way the positivity of the participants manifested was that many, notwithstanding the challenges they faced in their own lives, expressed gratitude for the advantages and successes they have enjoyed. Sharon reflected on her own success relative to other students in foster care.

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"All I can think about is there's always somebody else who has it worse than I do. I know a few people who've been in twelve or thirteen different foster homes. And they've all been really bad." Alika, Caitlin, Lucy, and Adriana all shared examples of situations in which they had avoided some of the pitfalls into which they had seen other foster youth fall. For Adriana, recognizing her own good fortune breeds not just gratitude, but also empathy for others.

> And I see the struggles that all these current foster youth and alumni go through. And a lot of them have to take a break on education. Some of them don't even finish their high school diploma. And I feel so bad that I can't help them besides maybe referring them to get their GED.

The positive perspective of the participants is all the more noteworthy given the adversity they have faced. Davidai and Gilovich (2016) argue that most people tend to overestimate the barriers they've face because obstacles demand more attention than do advantages. In a series of experiments designed to test people's perspectives in a variety of spheres−from politics, to sports, to birth order−they found that most people tend to believe the obstacles they face are greater than the advantages they enjoy, leading to bitterness and jealousy. On the other hand, gratitude and appreciation correlate with people being happier, healthier, and kinder. "The flipside of this toxic stew of resentment, envy, and entitlement is gratitude" (p. 837). The participants in the present study actually have faced a lopsided share of adversity, yet their narratives still emphasize positives over negative and advantages over deficits.

In addition to appreciating their own good fortune, the participants avoided unhealthy resentment towards other people in their lives, even those who had fallen short of expectations or caused them harm. Adriana was able to accept members of her family who had expressed doubt

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about her potential or failed to support her in the past. "I don't keep that grudge on anyone who said that to me. But I forgive them, with any negative words they ever said to me, I will accept it because of my behavior back then." Alika and Caitlyn were able to maintain positive relationships with their mothers, in part by recognizing their limitations. Melanie recognized the destructive cycles that her parents repeated throughout her childhood, yet she remained profoundly forgiving of her parents. "I'm such a big softy. I can never hate them because of what they did. I don't know why I cannot. I just don't hate it."

Agency and Empowerment

Another central theme in the stories of the participants was their ability to exercise agency and control in their own lives. While important to all adolescents, autonomy and power are particularly meaningful to youth in foster care for whom major life decisions are often made by strangers without their knowledge or input. Lucy described the importance of agency in her narrative. "I have it all. And I made it happen. It could be totally different. But I honestly think it's the way that people choose their outcome. If they don't have the motivation, they don't feel like they can do it, they'll never do it." Alika described how feelings of empowerment facilitated his educational success in college. "I just had a lot of freedom. I had resources. I had power. Just going to classes and stuff, it's like power in itself. You're kind of in control of things"

Opportunities to provide input and exercise control over decisions helped to give the participants a sense of their own strength and capacity. As discussed previously, influencing a school placement decision was an essential part of the educational success narrative for Lucy, Adriana, Alika, and Kawhi. This is not only because they achieved their preferred outcome but also because the process afforded them the opportunity to exercise agency and control. Adriana

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helped orchestrate her own adoption by her grandparents in order to be able to attend college on Oahu when she graduated from high school at 17. She explained that while she was under the jurisdiction of the family court, she couldn't go off-island until turning 18. "Having somebody hold you back from something that you want to do, it was like a 'No' for me." Lucy resisted when DHS considered placing her with her estranged, mentally ill father. "Like, why are you going to put me with someone who I don't want to be with, who has never been part of my life? And that's when I had to advocate for myself. I said, 'No, no, no!'" Melanie chose to continue participating in sports even though she knew her parents had different priorities. She explained the choice she had to make. "My parents needed money, but I needed to stay in school; then I wanted to have my sports. So, the only thing I could give up was the job, because sports was way important to me."

While the participants placed a high value on exercising control and agency in their lives, they also recognized aspects of their stories over which they had not had control. Several discussed the process of coming to terms with and overcoming feelings of shame associated with their entry into foster care. Caitlin discussed the importance of separating the negative experiences in her past from her own concept of self. "We're misunderstood as bad kids. We're not bad kids. We just got bad…our lives are the consequences of other people's choices." Kawhi explained how the negative stereotype of children and youth in foster care is mistaken.

People have a stigma that foster kids are bad kids, and that they got in because they are bad kids and their parents don't want them. And that's like false. They are in through no fault of their own and they got trauma that they're dealing with.

Lucy, Sharon, Nick, and Adriana all experienced feelings of guilt associated with the death of a parent. Nick felt responsible because of a fight he had with his father the day before he passed away. "I mean when my dad passed away I thought it was my fault." The process of forgiveness and recognizing their blamelessness was an important step for several participants. "It took me a while to get over it and not blame myself so much," said Sharon of her father's death.

The participants also felt empowered to maintain distance or end relationships with people who might have a negative influence on them. Caitlin, Alika, and Lucy had all established boundaries in a potentially unhealthy relationship with a birth parent. Lucy, whose father had never played a role in her life and is living on the street, chose to forgo any relationship at all. "At this point, if we were to enter each other's lives I would not benefit from him at all. I'd be helping somebody, and honestly that's not a responsibility that I need to take or want to take." Adriana forgave her family members who had doubted her in the past. But she was also unwilling to accept unsupportive behavior in the future. "If they ever tell that to me again, I will…I wouldn't want them to be part of my life, because that's like a negative support system right there." Both Adriana and Lucy had grown apart from some of their friends whose aspiration did not match their own. Lucy explained why the difficult process of separation from old friends was nonetheless necessary for her own growth. "Yes, those were great memories, but that's not who I'm transforming to become. And you're not growing with me. You're growing in a different direction and you're taking me down. I can't go down; I've got to go up."

The participants' sense of agency and control was also reinforced by the experience of sacrifice and hard work. Kawhi connected his daily journey to school to his determination to achieve his goals. "I didn't mind sacrificing the bus ride to get to school because I wanted to be there and be with my friends." Lucy and Adriana also had to make long commutes to school in

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order to maintain a preferred school placement. Melanie made similar sacrifices in order to participate in sport, finding transportation to practices and games without the support of her foster parents.

Several participants expressed pride at achieving a measure of financial autonomy while in care through work. Lucy worked while she was in high school in order to maintain her independence from her foster parents.

> I worked 30 hours a week throughout high school just so that that way I could pay for my own proms, my own dresses, my own banquets, my own yearbook, my own cap and gown. Just so that I could afford to do basically the normal things that a school student would do.

Nick said that he always had a job, "as far back as I can remember." He expressed great pride in his hard work. He explained that he had been largely self-sufficient since his father died when he was 11 years old. "I mean that was a big change in my life and I had to prove to myself that I could do it." During college, Alika maintained a sometimes frantic schedule juggling work, school, and other activities. "I would wake up early, do a couple classes, go to my morning practice, go back to school, do a class, go back to afternoon practice, drive a half hour, and work the night shift as a delivery driver" These experiences reinforced the participants sense of agency and efficacy.

Future Focus and Goal Setting

All the participants discussed goals and aspirations they had for their future. Several had specific educational and professional goals in mind and were taking tangible steps to achieve these goals. Adriana, Alika, Lucy, Caitlin, and Kawhi all planned to go into social work. Adriana described her academic and professional plans. "Well, right now I'm going to be a senior in the MSW program at the Myron B. Thomas School of Social Work. I hope to get good grades so I can go into advance standing and get my MSW in a year. But I've been thinking about going to law school." Caitlin had a long term plan in mind, involving a degree in social work followed by law school. "For my practicum, I'm thinking either CASA or Family Court. Because I do want to become a CASA or a GAL or something, and then become a judge because you need like 10 years of experience." Melanie planned to work with children, probably as a teacher or in a similar capacity. "I guess the thing about me is that I could actually see myself working with kids for a long period of time." Several of the participants anticipated working with foster youth, either in child welfare or the education system.

In addition to their intent to meet educational, financial, and professional goals, the participants were also driven by their desire to avoid repeating the negative behaviors and patterns they saw in their parents and birth families. Alika described his determination to achieve greater success than his birth parents. "I knew I wanted to do better than where my mom and dad have done and stuff." Lucy explained that watching her mother struggle spurred her to push herself academically. "I just don't even want to get into it. But seeing them live paycheck to paycheck just like my mom did and struggle. I just never wanted that for me." Caitlin talked about her desire to be a better parent and provider than her mother had been.

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For some of the participants, the desire to succeed in the future was motivated in part by an urge to prove wrong those who had doubted them in the past. Sharon felt that few people in her life would have predicted her success in school. "It's taught me just to not give up on myself, even though I've had a lot of doubters." Adriana talked about how her family and many of the professionals involved with the family court and juvenile justice system assumed she would continue to struggle; instead, she made a dramatic turn around. "I proved pretty much everybody wrong." For Caitlin, proving her detractors wrong was a primary motivation, not only to graduate from high school, but also to achieve her life goals. "I've been told, like, success, and just having a good life in general, even being happy, was not realistic at all, was unrealistic. By my family and stuff like that. So just to prove them wrong; that's what I wanted to do."

The participants were also motivated by a desire to help others, especially other children and youth in the foster care system. Adriana volunteers with the Big Brother/Big Sister Program. Melanie works with the Boys and Girls Club. Alika had hoped to start a support group for former foster youth while he was in college and intended to find ways to help in the future. "I wouldn't mind some capacity helping out with foster youth on this island, whatever campus it is or some kind of capacity, but just to help youth strive and just succeed." Both Sharon and Lucy expressed gratitude for their success and talked about wanting to give back. Lucy appreciated the support she had gotten to stay in school and on track. "And I get that; and that's why I want to be a social worker and give back to others." Adriana's desire to help children and youth in foster care underlies her goal of one day becoming an attorney. "I want to advocate for children in the court system who don't have a voice and I want to be that voice for them. I want to make sure their voice is heard in all their concerns." Caitlin's commitment to the children and youth in foster care is fundamental to her drive to succeed. "Because I can't let these foster kids down; I

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promised too many of them that I would do something, and that's a promise I intend on keeping."

Resilient Reintegration

Another central theme in all the narratives of the participants is resilient reintegration after adversity. All the participants experienced periods of disruption related to their entry into foster care. However, they also experienced evolution and growth in response to the adversity they faced. This is evident from the fact that all the participants point to some key turning point in their narrative; a moment that represented their determination and ability to control their own life narrative. Melanie, Adriana, Caitlin, and Alika experienced meaningful academic breakthroughs. Melanie, who believed her special education identification may have been erroneous, was able to transition back to mainstream education. Adriana experienced an academic turn around after years of behavioral challenges, substance abuse, and entanglement with the juvenile justice system. Caitlin, who had experienced academic and behavioral challenges throughout high school, was motivated to alter her patterns. "I just wanted to graduate and get the fuck out of that house." Alika also experienced a period of poor academic performance, "but my last year, I really proved myself." He described the way he reinforced his own narrative of resilience, even though some of his own behavior was counter-productive. "To be honest, I partied pretty hard sometimes, like my early kid years. I don't know, I was just always resilient and I always told myself, 'You've got to stay in school and you've got to keep learning.'"

In the context of this study, the turning point Kawhi identifies in his educational narrative is particularly salient. It springs from discovering his voice and the ability to advocate for

himself. "I believe closed mouths don't get fed. And if you don't speak up for yourself, then people who are in charge of life will speak for you." The key moment came when his self-advocacy with his social worker and GAL resulted in his remaining at the high school he preferred. However, learning to speak for himself had far-reaching consequences. He felt that his relationships with his teachers also improved when he was more forthcoming about being in foster care. "I think in high school they were more supportive. I guess because I was a little bit more open with it, and more willing to work with it." The change also impacted his relationship with peers. For a long time he hid the fact that he was in foster care, telling people that he lived with his uncle and auntie without revealing that they were his foster parents. He felt less positive about his school experience because he didn't want to share his story and "life was, like, secret." In high school, he began to feel differently and to be more open about being in foster care. Kawhi explained how his attitude changed. "I never care that much anymore. I just let it all go. That was something beyond my control. I came to realize that. I entered care through no fault of my own. So I shouldn't be ashamed about it."

For the other participants, the key moment of their narrative was less directly related to school, but no less important to their success and resilience. Experiences before and during foster care made trust a particular challenge for Sharon. A turning point in her story was when she was finally able to form a lasting bond and settle in with one foster family. "I think everybody noticed that that was a big step for me to want to make that decision. So it was really good, I think." For Lucy a key moment came in trying to process her feelings of trauma and guilt from her mother's death. She became dependant on an emotionally abusive partner relationship until she came to certain realizations about the relationship and herself. "I realized that I can't rely on other people to help me deal with what's going on. And that the only person I can rely on is

myself. And it was through those realizations that I just kept pushing myself trying to make it to graduation and other things are happening." For Nick the big change came in the way he dealt with stress and anger. Despite early exposure to extreme violence, he learned to resolve conflict without resorting to violence. "So coming from there is a big difference from now. Because before I couldn't handle my anger and everything."

Beyond simply recovering and healing from adversity, the participants' resilient orientation allowed them to see opportunities for learning and growth in setbacks and challenges. Alika couched a mentor's refusal to write a letter of recommendation as an opportunity for him to reevaluate and make more thoughtful plans for graduate school. Lucy described how the unexpected death of her mother had at least one beneficial consequence. "You know we didn't realize that that was going to make us stronger as a family. Because at that point we weren't that close." Sharon reflected positively on receiving an F in an AP class, "It was a challenge and I liked being challenged. But yeah, it was fun." Sharon also explained how she tried to process her experiences when a summer program she participated in made her frustrated and misunderstood. "I mean I try to take everything I learn from situations like that or programs like that and try to put it into my everyday life. I think they're all learning experiences."

In many ways, the most striking expression of resilient reintegration by the participants is found in the way they had come to terms with the traumatic events and circumstances that led them to foster care. By no means did the participants minimize the trauma and adversity they had faced. Yet, they were also able to recognize and appreciate the way facing these challenges had helped shape them and contributed to making them who they are. Nick reflected on his own violent and chaotic childhood. "Like most people say I would change this or I would change that, but they don't think about where they are now. Without your past, you're never going to be that

same person." Adriana's feelings about her experiences were mixed. On the one hand, she said, "Sometimes I look back and like, I wish I could do it all over again and actually focus on high school." Yet she also felt that entering foster care had opened some opportunities and led to some positive outcomes.

> But the thing is, it was hard at home; there was no money. I don't know, but in my junior and senior year, I got to do those things. I got to participate in sports and I got to go to prom. I look back and I think, "What if I didn't even get to do any of those things?"

This perspective allowed the participants to integrate even the most harrowing of the adversities they had faced into their personal narratives of resilience and success. Lucy explained that many people do not understand how she accepts and even recognizes the value in the adversity she has experienced.

> And they are looking at you like they're sorry. And I'm not sorry because if I could rewind time and do anything differently, I probably wouldn't have. Because I wouldn't be the person I am today and I don't think that I would be as strong as I am.

Among the participants, Caitlin spoke the most about the lasting effects of trauma she had experienced. Yet, she nonetheless expressed a resilient perspective in relation to what she had been through.

> But my past molds who I am today. So I just own up to it. I just accept my mistakes. I accept what's happened to me, because without it I wouldn't be the person I am today. And I'm not going to say I'm a survivor. I did more than just survive.

This pattern in the participants' narratives resembles Richardson's model of resilient

reintegration whereby an individual may "experience some insight or growth through disruption"

(Richardson, 2002, p. 312). For these participants, the process of reintegration has left them not

just whole, but in some respects stronger and more resilient than they began.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Above all, the present study was undertaken with the intent to provide a qualitative context for understanding how children and youth in foster care experience their own educational journeys. In the existing research, the experiences of students in foster care are often reduced to statistics documenting academic risk, deficit, and failure. By drawing heavily on the words and stories of former foster students themselves, the study aimed to offer a descriptive view, not just of events and outcome, but also the hows and the whys underlying events. I hoped to map the educational landscape of the participants through the lens of the perspectives and feelings that gave that landscape contour and color. The goal of elevating these voices, often muted in both the legal system and in scholarly research, may be sufficient justification for this study without more. Hopefully, however, listening deeply to the stories of the participants and taking their voices and perspectives seriously can not only to deepen and enrich the current literature, but also draw attention to potential opportunities to promote educational success and resilience for students in foster care.

This chapter is organized around key conclusions about how the adult actors with a role in the lives of students in foster care can encourage educational success and resilience. In order to improve educational outcomes for students in foster care, it is necessary (1) to prioritize educational achievement for all students in foster care; (2) to reduce the incidence and impact of school placement instability for students in foster care; (3) to better educate and inform teachers and school personnel about foster care generally and about the circumstances of individual students in foster care; and (4) to help students in foster care construct narratives of educational success and resilience. Each broad conclusion arises from and is supported by the specific finding of this study. I believe each conclusion adds to our understanding of students in foster

care and has the potential to improve child welfare practice as it relates to education. In addition to setting forth these broad conclusions, this chapter provides specific recommendations to improve educational success and resilience for students in foster care. Finally, this chapter also addresses the limitations of the present study and suggests possible avenues for future research.

Prioritize Educational Achievement for All Students in Foster Care

In high school, when Adriana was using drugs and alcohol, performing poorly at school, and in and out of juvenile court for shoplifting and getting into fights, it would have been difficult to foresee that she would go on to pursue a master's degree in social work and intern in a senatorial office in Washington D.C.. When Melanie was in third grade, moving from one unstable living situation to another, and unable to write her own name without assistance, few of the adults in her life would have predicted that she would graduate from high school and complete her associate's degree with the aspiration of becoming a teacher. When Alika was in school, coping with depression and struggling to express himself, he would have seemed an unlikely candidate to go on to graduate school and become a leading advocate for foster youth on both the state and national level. Yet, in each of these cases, the youth in question overcame the adversity they had faced and leveraged educational success to increase their opportunities in life.

The thrust of these examples is to show that students in foster care, even those with enormous potential for educational success and resilience, are likely to experience academic and behavioral challenges. The trauma and disruption that leads children and youth into foster care also impacts their attitude, behavior, and performance at school (Blome, 1997; Smithgall et al., 2004). For some of the study participants this manifested as inattention and distractibility at school; uncertainty about their future and worries about the well-being of birth parents and

siblings interfered with their ability to concentrate and focus in class or on homework. All the

study participants had periods of mediocre to failing academic performance. In addition, most of

the participants exhibited oppositional or violent behavior, including truancy, defiance, and

getting into fights. Several participants experienced negative or self-harming behaviors including

depression, cutting, and suicidal ideation. A majority of the participants were suspended or

expelled from school at least once. Prior research has shown that children and youth in foster

care are more likely to exhibit disruptive or violent behavior at school and to be disciplined for

such behavior (Finkelstein et al., 2002; McMillen et al., 2003). The present study shows that this

pattern holds true even for academically resilient students in foster care.

These findings show that academic challenges, behavioral issues, even aggression and

violence displayed by students in foster care should not cause child welfare, school, or family

court personnel to quickly or easily discount a students' potential for academic success. Students

in foster care need adult supporters to prioritize education, to believe in the students' potential,

and to set high expectations. In each of the narratives of educationally success and resilience that

compose this study, adult supporters demonstrated, in word and deed, belief in the youth's ability

to outperform what seemed to be their educational trajectory. This support in turn, helped to

promote educational resilience.

The legal interruption of parental rights in addition to the challenges often facing their

birth families leave many students in foster care without effective educational supporters and

advocates. The participants who exhibited particularly high levels of educational attainment, as

measured by their pursuit or completion of a post-graduate degree, also reported a high degree of

connectedness to adult supporters, both in the number of supporters and the depth of the

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connection and support. These supporters assumed some of the roles, responsibilities, and duties typically performed by birth parents.

The participants' stories revealed the characteristics of their most impactful relationships with adult supporters. Participants pointed to supporters who they felt set high expectations for them and believed in their ability to succeed. Participants valued supporters who they felt listened to them, involved them in decision-making, and were willing to advocate on their behalf. The participants also emphasized the importance of support that manifested in tangible actions: providing academic tutoring, helping to complete financial aid and scholarship paperwork, helping to create a study schedule, driving them to school, or loaning them a car to take a driver's test. These actions by supporters not only helped the participants in the moment, but also helped build their capacity to respond to future challenges.

While the participants in this study all benefited from the presence of one or more committed, caring adult, their stories also reveal the limitations of many of the adult actors who play a role in the education of students in foster care. When present at all, birth parents demonstrated their inability to provide consistent care and support. Foster parents often lacked the knowledge and inclination to be committed educational advocates. The effectiveness of case workers was limited by high turnover, excessive caseloads, and competing priorities. While efforts, legal and otherwise, have been made to elevate the importance of the educational concerns of children and youth in foster care, this study suggests that more must be done to make educational success a priority for all students in foster care.

The findings suggest that active, tangible support from the adults responsible for students in foster care should extend to support for extracurricular activities as well. The study

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participants who were involved in extracurricular activities described multiple benefits. Coaches and advisors took on the role of additional adult supporters. Extracurricular activities, particularly sports, helped the participants develop friendships and connectedness within their peer group. On the one hand, extracurricular activities provided opportunities for validation and recognition; on the other hand, such activities could provide an escape and refuge from the sometimes difficult realities of the participants' home lives.

Notwithstanding these benefits, several participants encountered obstacles to extracurricular involvement. This came primarily in the form of actual or perceived lack of support from foster parents. In at least one case this was a disciplinary consequence of a failure to meet academic expectations. While the wisdom of imposing such a consequence may be questioned, it arose from a conscious decision ostensibly intended to benefit the student. However, more commonly, the participants pointed to the unwillingness on the part of foster parents to spend the extra time or money as the reason they were not involved in extracurricular activities. Given the potential benefits of extracurricular involvement, social workers and court personnel should encourage foster parents to support extracurricular involvement, and when necessary, facilitate such involvement themselves.

Reduce the Incidence and Impact of School Placement Instability

For Lucy, Adriana, Kawhi, and Alika the fact that they were able to remain at the school they preferred was an essential element of their narratives of educational success. They had various reasons for preferring one school to another: higher academic quality, better campus safety, or a greater degree of comfort with the neighborhood and community. For all of the participants who maintained a preferred school placement, remaining at a school where they had

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established friends, where they were familiar with the school culture, and where they felt connected to supporters was a factor in their educational success. Existing research shows the impact of school placement changes on the academic success of students in foster care (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, 2003). The present study highlights the importance of the socio-emotional dimensions of school placement stability

The process by which the participants stayed at their preferred school was important as well. The participants were able to voice their opinions, and those opinions was listened to and taken seriously by the adults with control over their lives. In addition, several participants had to go to great lengths, literally and figuratively, to attend their preferred school. They commuted long hours each day, demonstrating their commitment and determination. This resulted in an enhanced sense, not only of agency in the decision-making process, but also of personal investment in the solution.

For any student a school placement change is disruptive. For students in foster care, the potential negative impact is magnified, both in the risk of curricular incoherence and the social and emotional consequences of school placement changes. The participants who had to make multiple school moves had fewer consistent friendships and felt more isolated. The participants with the strongest connections with teachers and school personnel had fewer school changes. Beyond interrupting individual friendships and supportive connections, participants who changed schools had difficulty adjusting when encountering a new school culture and different student demographics.

These findings suggest that school placement stability should be strongly pursued, not only to avoid the negative consequences of school changes, but also for the positive benefits in

terms of connectedness, familiarity, and continuity. Furthermore, students in foster care should be involved in choices around school placement. Federal law provides that students in foster care should remain in their school of origin unless it is in their best interest not to remain. This best interest determination should be made, when age and developmentally appropriate, with input from the student. Not only will this allow for a more informed determination, but also enhance the sense of agency and investment for students in foster care.

If maintaining a school placement is not in the best interest of the student, then more support should be provided to help the student acclimate to the new school and to access academic and other resources. Students in foster care should be immediately and holistically assessed when entering a new school, not only for academic needs, but also to identify appropriate resources, services, and ways to integrate them into the new school community. Several participants experienced curricular incoherence when moving between schools, leaving them feeling unprepared or forcing them to catch up on their own. One participant suspected inappropriate identification for special education that may have resulted in part from school placement instability. None of the participants reported that any special efforts were made to assess them, connect them with resources, or to otherwise smooth the transition to a new school. Moreover, participants who made an undesired school move discussed how this experience compounded the sense of instability and dislocation that they already felt as a result of their foster status.

Better Educate and Inform Teachers and School Personnel About Foster Care Generally and About the Circumstances of Individual Students in Foster Care

This study reveals that, while a majority of the participants felt they had received positive educational support and advocacy from either social workers or GALs or both, only half of the participants identified specific classroom teachers as educational supporters and even fewer characterized teachers as primary supporters. This result is at first glance unexpected given that classroom teachers are responsible for setting academic expectations and delivering academic content. Teachers are also likely to have more day-to-day contact with student than do either social workers or GALs.

However, these findings are less surprising in light of the fact that most teachers have limited experience with, and understanding of students in foster care. Most of the participants reported that, to their knowledge, their teachers were unaware that they were in foster care. Moreover, several of the participants encountered teachers who demonstrated that they either lacked any general understanding of the nature of foster care, or worse, carried negative preconceptions about student in foster care. This would tend to make a strong, positive connection between these teachers and students more difficult, if not impossible.

This proposition is supported by the fact that in every case that a participant identified a classroom teacher, administrator, or other school personnel as a key educational supporter, that supporter was also aware that the participant was in foster care. In most cases, key adult supporters were people who were already aware of the participants' backgrounds and did not require them to identify or explain their situations or themselves. The participants tended to feel the most comfortable and connected with adults who they felt understood their lives in foster

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care. Several of the participants expressed their reluctance to talk about their situation with new people.

Teachers don't always even know that a student is in foster care, much less the details of the students' experiences, like foster placement changes, hearings and other developments in their family court case, or separation from siblings. The capacity of teachers and other school personnel to support students in foster care generally is limited when they lack of knowledge and information about the foster care system and about children and youth in foster care. In the narrative of the participants, fluctuations in academic performance and behavior were often directly related to interactions with birth parents or siblings, developments in family court, or events in their foster homes. The ability to address individual student needs is curtailed when teachers fail to receive relevant information from child welfare and family court personnel who are acting in a quasi parental role. This conclusion is in line with current research showing a need for more training for teachers and other school personnel, and for better information sharing among child welfare, family court, and school personnel (California Education Collaborative, 2008; Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010).

More training and information sharing would allow teachers and school personnel to better serve students in foster care in a number of ways. Better understanding of the impact of trauma and instability would allow schools to establish better resources and support systems for students in foster care. It could lead to better assessment for special education and other services, and help to school personnel to support students in foster care after a school placement change. Better information sharing by child welfare and family court personnel about specific events in the outside-of-school lives of students in foster care could allow for a more informed, and perhaps more compassionate, response to specific academic and behavior problems. Just as

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importantly, it might allow more teachers and other school personnel to assume roles as key educational supporters and advocates for students in foster care. The current paradigm represents a tremendous missed opportunity to better support educational success for students in foster care.

Facilitate the Construction of Narratives of Educational Success and Resilience

The stories of the participants in this study reveal themes of optimism, agency, and aspiration. One conclusion to draw from these finding is that relationships and opportunities that contribute to positive life experiences promote educational resilience. This conclusion suggests that those with a stake in the educational success and resilience of students in foster care should facilitate experiences that tend to bolster these attitudes and outlooks.

Such a response would entail providing access to more positive experiences for students in foster care, like participation in extracurricular activities, going to prom, or getting a driver's license; what Caitlin referred to as "being a normal teenager." It would mean ensuring that students in foster care make multiple strong connections to adult supporters who can provide assistance and encouragement. It would include involving the students in educational decision-making, especially as it relates to school placement. It would require training, practice, and support to help students develop the skills necessary for independence and autonomy. Students would be encouraged to set goals for their future, and make plans to achieve them.

That these suggestions are already recognized as best practices in child welfare makes them no less significant (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Neal, 2017; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). This study demonstrates the salience of these strategies for the specific goal of encouraging educational success and resilience for students in foster care in Hawai'i. The descriptive, qualitative nature of this study shows how these factors tend to overlap

and reinforce each other. This study also shows the need to encourage teachers and school personnel to provide more opportunities for these types of experiences in the school setting, as they are the building blocks for narratives of educational resilience.

Through the lens of narrative theory, there is another conclusion suggested by these findings, if we consider the participants not only the actors, but also the authors of their own life stories. As humans we all have both negative and positive experiences, we feel both powerlessness and agency, and our stories include elements of both regret and opportunity. Narrative theory would say the inflection point lies where we choose which of these themes to emphasize and incorporate in our life narratives. The notion that narrative concepts can be applied to promote resilience is at the heart of the field of narrative therapy (Gilling, 2016). The stories we tell about ourselves and our lives are not singular and unchanging; they are actually composed of multiple narrative alternatives and subject to influence (Bruner, 2004). Just as does resilience theory, narrative therapy seeks to draw attention away from problem-saturated stories to focus instead on strengths and opportunities. Problems are externalized and differentiated from the individual; this allows a more nuanced personal narrative to develop, one focused on the skills, resources, and values of the individual (Semmler & Williams, 2000). By developing awareness of the multiplicity of storylines present in each life, and the interpretive agency inherent in autobiographical narration, narrative therapy invites the creation of "preferred" stories. "This reflects the idea that stores are not any old alternative, but represent people's intentions and what they want for their lives. 'Preferred' suggests we make a choice to look for something other than the problem" (Gilling, 2016).

As storytellers, especially through their involvement with the HFYC and HI HOPES, the participants edited, crafted, and adapted their life stories and performed them for specific

purposes. Specifically, they advocated to improve the lives of children and youth in foster care through changes to law, policy, and practice in the child welfare system. Furthermore, they used their own stories to inspire, not only audiences of current and former foster youth, but also peers, siblings, and younger family members. Advocacy involves identifying avenues for constructive change and exerting energy and effort to reach this goal; advocacy therefore requires a focus on the future and a sense of agency. Using autobiography to inspire involves illustrating how adversity can spur growth; in other words, the importance of remaining positive and optimistic in the face of adversity because triumph, in the form of resilient reintegration, is possible. Therefore motive and motif coincide in the participants' stories.

In this way, the themes present in the participants' personal narratives correlate with the way they have purposefully told their stories. One explanation is that these themes were already present in the participants' lives, providing the grist for compelling and inspiring stories. However, narrative theory invites consideration of a different idea; that the causal effect may not run exclusively in one direction. In the process of polishing and performing their stories for purposes of advocacy and inspiration, the participants were simultaneously choosing preferred stories that emphasized and reinforced their own themes of educational resilience. It does not seem unreasonable to imagine that this process helped the participants internalize versions of their own stories that could in turn contribute to their resilience and success.

Narrative theory suggests that the stories we tell about ourselves matter a great deal. Narrative therapy is grounded in the premise that the way people tell these stories can help them heal after trauma and promote psychological health. This study shows that adult supporters of students in foster care may be able to facilitate the construction of educational narratives that in

turn bolster educational success and resilience. If the opportunity exists, as Minnow (1990) argues, then must we not at least hazard the attempt?

> For survivors of family violence, words may be doors to the land of change. Words may provide these survivors with something to hold on to and thus something to aid recovery, something to grasp for a modicum of control and recollection of self.

Recommendations for Practice

There are several steps that can be taken to ensure that educational success is prioritized for all students in foster care during case planning. Every effort should be made to consider and prioritize education throughout the case planning process for all children and youth in foster care. Every hearing in family court should address educational well-being and consider the student's educational best interests going forward. One resource that might help family court judges would be a checklist of educational questions and concerns to be raised during hearings.

It is essential that every student in foster care have consistent, committed advocates for their educational success. During case planning, the court should identify the educational point person for each student. In different cases this might be a family member, foster parent, case manager, or GAL depending on these actors' relative capacity and effectiveness. If other approaches prove unsuccessful, another option would be to create and fund positions for educational specialists to work exclusively with students in foster care and to act as liaisons with the various professionals and other adults with a role in the lives of foster youth.

All child welfare and family court personnel should be trained to better understand the impact of trauma on adolescent development. This would help them to better understand how the impact of trauma on cognitive and socio-emotional development can lead to academic and

behavioral challenges at school. More training should also be provided about the services available for students with physical, learning, or behavioral disabilities, navigating the special education system, and coordinating with surrogate parents. If child welfare and family court personnel have a better understanding of trauma, they will be better able to meet the needs of the youth with whom they work.

Students in foster care should be provided with tangible support for educational success. This would include on-going assessment and tutoring in specific academic subjects. It should also include support for academic skills building more generally. A program akin to the Independent Living Program could provide support for skills related to study habits, planning, time-management, and organization−skills student in foster care are less likely to acquire in the home.

Child welfare and family court personnel should also ensure that students in foster care have access to all the resources they need not only for academic success, but also to participant in extracurricular and co-curricular activities. Case managers and GALs should explicitly ask students in foster care whether they have an interest in extracurricular activities. If a student does express interest, child welfare and family court personnel should encourage and support such involvement, either directly or through foster parents.

Every effort should be made to maintain school placement stability of students in foster care. Consistent with federal law, students in foster care should maintain school stability unless it is in their best interest to change schools. Whenever feasible, foster placement decisions should be made with consideration of school placement stability. If a student in foster care wishes to remain at a preferred school after a foster placement change, child welfare and family court

personnel should work with foster families to explore transportation options. When appropriate, the court should provide financial or other support for transportation to a preferred school.

Child welfare and family court personnel should solicit the input of students in foster care prior to any school placement change and the students' preferences and the reasons underlying the preference should be carefully considered. Over the last decades, successful efforts have been made to encourage foster youth to attend family court hearings and to be involved in their cases. The goal is to inform and empower the youth. Involving students in school placement decisions would serves similar purposes and the students may actually be able to exert more influence on the ultimate outcome. As this study shows, when students in foster care are engaged in school placement decisions there are multiple benefits.

If a school placement change is desirable or unavoidable, immediate and holistic support should be provided to help the student's transition to the new school. Child welfare personnel should ensure that all records and documents are transferred smoothly. There should be a comprehensive assessment of academic and psychosocial needs of the students at the new school. This would include evaluation of any curricular incoherence between receiving school and school of origin. There should also be an intake meeting with a school counselor who could determine what additional services or resources might be appropriate to help the student acclimate to the new school environment and culture. The counselor should connect the student with appropriate resources and continue to monitor the transition process. The counselor should also meet with classroom teachers to ascertain if they need any additional support or training to meet the student's needs.

Multidimensional training for teachers and school personnel could also lead to better educational outcomes for students in foster care. The content of such training should include information that would help teachers understand students in foster care as individuals and learners: how children enter foster care, the impact of trauma and instability, the causes and consequences of curricular incoherence, etc. Additional training on topics—like the roles of different actors in the child welfare and family court systems and navigating the special education system for students in foster care—should also be made available.

The training should also be available in different formats. General information about the educational needs of students in foster care could be offered as a component of in-service training or district-wide professional development. This might help to dispel residual stigma attached to foster status. However, more specialized training on targeted topics should also be available as online modules. In this way, a classroom teacher with a student in foster care in her or his class would have easy access to additional information should questions or concerns arise.

Policies and procedures should be put into place to ensure that educationally relevant information about students in foster care flows to the appropriate school personnel. This should include all the teachers working directly with the student. A system should be put into place to ensure that schools are immediately aware that a particular student is in foster care and about any services currently in place for the student. Child welfare and family court personnel should ensure that all information reaches the school.

Teachers should be informed, in advance if possible, about changes of foster care placement, separation or reunification with siblings, family court hearings, and other significant events impacting the life and well-being of a student in foster care. This would allow classroom

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teachers and other school personnel to better understand what the students are experiencing, and to address academic or behavioral challenges proactively. At the beginning of each school year or after a school placement change, a meeting should be arranged among child welfare, family court, and school personnel to coordinate services to meet the educational needs of students in foster care. At a minimum, school personnel, GALs, case managers, and other service providers should all be in regular contact, whether a student in foster care is experiencing academic difficulties or not.

The findings of this study suggest that purposeful storytelling can promote educational resilience. Additional support should be provided to organizations like HFYC and HI HOPES that promote purposeful storytelling. More initiatives that incorporated storytelling, especially in the educational realm, should be explored. The concepts and principles of narrative theory can also be incorporated into child welfare practice in other ways. How social workers, GALs, and even judges talk with students in foster care about their education and their aspirations may influence the students' perception of their own resilience. Focusing on positivity, agency, goal setting, and reintegration after disruption may have a beneficial impact.

Possible Avenues for Future Research

While the current study adds to our understanding of the educational experiences and outcomes of students in foster care, it raises many questions as well. The following areas are likely to prove fruitful for future research.

This study suggests that teachers and school personnel have limited knowledge and understanding of students in foster care generally and that they often know little about the circumstances of specific students in their schools and classrooms. It would useful to examine

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exactly what teachers, administrators, and other school personnel know about the foster care system, whether they understand how children and youth enter foster care, and what preconceptions they have about students in foster care. This could be studied with either a quantitative or qualitative approach.

In order to improve services and outcomes for students in foster care, it is also important to learn exactly how information flows between child welfare, family court, and school personnel. It would be important to know exactly what information is currently being shared with schools, how it is disseminated to school personnel, and whether it is consistently reaching classroom teachers. Just as importantly, perhaps, would be a quantitative study to determine whether providing school personnel with more knowledge and information actually leads to better outcomes for students in foster care.

Additional study of how schools administer disciplinary consequences for students in foster care is also warranted. This study shows that even successful and resilient students in foster care experience academic and behavior challenges at school and that these challenges often lead to disciplinary consequences. What is not shown by this research is how the performance and behavior of students in foster care is perceived by teachers, administrators, and school personnel, and how decisions about academic and disciplinary consequences are made. Are students in foster care likely to receive a more or less severe consequence for the same infraction as a non-foster peer? Some of the participants suspected that school personnel may have carried assumptions or biases against students in foster care. This may have resulted in terms of more extreme disciplinary consequences. On the other hand, some participants suspected that they were held to lower academic standards. However, since the study relied on the perspectives, memory, and veracity of participants, this may not have actually been the case.

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Quantitative research could reveal whether a disparity exists in the way schools discipline students in foster care compared to other students. A qualitative study could shed light on how the perceptions and assumptions of school personnel impacts their disciplinary decision-making towards students in foster care.

Another area for further inquiry is the impact of peer relationships on educational success and resilience for students in foster care. For this study, I choose to focus on the impact of adult supporters on educational resilience. This is because, given the legal interruption of parental rights and the challenges facing many birth families, students in foster care require foster parents and child welfare and court personnel to play a quasi parental role in their education. However, in addition to their adult supporters, many of the participants discussed the role their friends played in supporting educational success and resilience. Some participants spoke about the importance of having friends with academic orientations and aspirations to attend college. Other participants spoke about breaking away from the negative influence of a particular peer group. Given that peers are often one of the strongest influences on adolescent behavior, this could be a particularly significant area for future research.

Another important avenue for future research is to further explore the impact of intentional storytelling on educational resilience. The findings of this study as they relate to storytelling and the impact of purposeful narrative were an organic outgrowth of the characteristics of the participants, rather than an inquiry that guided the research from the outset. A future study could examine purposeful storytelling as an intervention for a random sample of students in foster care. In this way it might be possible to parse the causal relation between purposeful storytelling and educational resilience. Future research could also examine the impact of narrative as it relates to cultural and ethnic identity in Hawaiʻi.

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