

University of Northern Colorado

Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC

Dissertations

Student Research

5-2019

Nevertheless They Persisted: Youth Formerly in Foster Care Who Have Experienced Trauma and Their Journey to Postsecondary Education

Kristin Janine Myers

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digscholarship.unco.edu/dissertations>

Recommended Citation

Myers, Kristin Janine, "Nevertheless They Persisted: Youth Formerly in Foster Care Who Have Experienced Trauma and Their Journey to Postsecondary Education" (2019). *Dissertations*. 556.
<https://digscholarship.unco.edu/dissertations/556>

This Text is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarship & Creative Works @ Digital UNC. For more information, please contact Jane.Monson@unco.edu.

© 2019

KRISTIN JANINE MYERS

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

NEVERTHELESS THEY PERSISTED: YOUTH FORMERLY
IN FOSTER CARE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA
AND THEIR JOURNEY TO POSTSECONDARY
EDUCATION

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Kristin Janine Myers

College of Education and Behavioral Sciences
Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education
Counselor Education and Supervision

May 2019

This Dissertation by: Kristin Janine Myers

Entitled: *Nevertheless They Persisted: Youth Formerly in Foster Care Who have Experienced Trauma and their Journey to Postsecondary Education*

has been approved as meeting the requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in College of Education in Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, Program of Counselor Education and Supervision

Accepted by the Doctoral Committee

Jennifer Smith, Ph.D., Research Advisor

Heather Helm, Ph.D., Committee Member

Lu Tian, Ph.D., Committee Member

Deborah Romero, Ph.D., Faculty Representative

Date of Dissertation Defense _____

Accepted by the Graduate School

Linda L. Black, Ed.D.
Associate Provost and Dean
Graduate School and International Admissions
Research and Sponsored Projects

ABSTRACT

Myers, Kristin Janine. *Nevertheless they persisted: Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced trauma and their journey to postsecondary education*. Published Doctor of Philosophy dissertation, University of Northern Colorado, 2019.

It is estimated that approximately 60% of children have experienced some form of trauma in their lifetime (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). Research in the last 20 years has shown the impact of childhood trauma on human development, social development, and learning, and yet, there is very little literature in school counseling about this topic (Perry, 2001, 2006). School counselors play an essential role in identifying barriers that impede students from receiving a high-quality education (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012), and are charged with reducing the educational attainment gap for the students they serve (Milsom & McCormick, 2015). There are many student populations that are at-risk of experiencing trauma, such as, children experiencing homelessness, students with disabilities, or involvement with the juvenile justice system (Fritz, 2017). Although any student could be at-risk of experiencing trauma, youth in foster care often have a history of childhood trauma (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). School counselors are in the position to advocate for youth by assisting them to excel academically and provide social and emotional support, especially for foster youth. Youth in foster care rarely get the opportunity to have their voices heard in the literature, particularly as it pertains to their experience with trauma. Most of the literature about trauma and education is deficit based, and does not provide insight into the lived

experiences of foster youth. This dissertation study addresses the gap in the literature through a phenomenological examination of nine former foster youth's experience of the kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) education system. Results of this study yielded eight primary themes and 43 secondary themes based on the data. The final identification of primary themes included: within the home environment; impact on learning; within the foster care system; impactful connections; emotional impact; motivators; and posttraumatic growth. The results provide a rich and thick description of what the phenomenon of being a student who has experienced trauma during K-12 education experiences, the former foster youth's interactions with school counselors, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma. Implications of this study include viewing trauma through a strengths-based lens, making impactful connections, and recognizing the possibility of posttraumatic growth were beneficial to the youth in this study. A discussion of the results, limitations, areas for future research, and implications for school counselors and counselor educators are provided.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are no words to truly represent my gratitude for everyone who supported me throughout this program. First and foremost, I want to thank the participants of this study. Thank you for giving me a glimpse at the strength, power, resilience, and growth despite the hardships you endured throughout your lives. This study would not have been possible without your bravery, and my hope for all of you is that you have already experienced the hardest days of your lives. Your future is bright, and I know each and every one of you will go on to accomplish great things in life.

I want to thank my family for the support and sacrifices you have all made throughout my life that made it possible for me to pursue higher education. To my parents, I thank you for your unconditional love and support. You are, and always have been, truly the best parents and I am thankful every day for both of you. To my sister, there is no way I could ever repay you for everything you have done for me. Thank you for taking me in, no questions asked, as I landed on your doorstep in the middle of a Friday afternoon. You have been there for me through the absolute worst time and best times of my life and everything in between. I will never stop looking up to you and appreciating you.

To Dr. Jennifer Smith, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for helping me through this research process. Your mentorship and leadership style helped me dig deeper in my research and writing. I have so much respect for you as a person, counselor educator, researcher, and writer. Thank you for stepping in and guiding me to make this

study better than I thought it could be. Thank you to Dr. Elysia Clemens for your mentorship throughout this whole program. You have been my advocate since the first day. You believed in me even when I did not believe in myself, and I thank you for never giving up on me. To Dr. Heather Helm, thank you for your support and inspiration throughout this program. You never gave up on me and helped me to grow as a clinician, counselor educator, supervisor, and researcher. Thank you for seeing through my self-doubt and for your continued encouragement. Thank you to Dr. Deborah Romero as a member of my committee and Graduate Assistant supervisor throughout the whole program. You taught me so many things I did not know I was lacking. I could not complete this program without your support and advocacy. Thank you to Dr. Stephen Wright and Dr. Lu Tian for your service on my committee and for helping me grow as a researcher.

To Liz, Maegen, Christina, and Alison, my life long llamas. This experience would not have been the same without you. Thank you for loving me unconditionally and being my friend. Thank you to my boss Judith for the many hours of support and encouragement to finish this degree, this would not have been possible without your support. Finally, thank you to my family and friends for your support and kindness throughout these past six years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER

I.	INTRODUCTION.....	1
	Role of the School Counselor	
	Educational Attainment Gap for Foster Care Youth	
	Youth Voice	
	Trauma-Informed School Counseling	
	Post-Traumatic Growth Theory	
	Statement of the Problem	
	Purpose of the Study and Research Questions	
	Rationale and Significance	
	Assumptions	
	Delimitations	
	Definitions and Terms	
	Organization of the Study	
II.	REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	21
	The Role of the School Counselor	
	Youth Voice in the Literature	
	State and Federal Care Legislation	
	Trauma	
	Childhood Trauma in Foster Care	
	Phenomenological Research	
	Conclusion	
III.	METHODOLOGY.....	59
	Epistemology	
	Theoretical Perspective	
	Phenomenological Methodology	
	Methods	
	Data Analysis	
	Researcher Stance	
	Trustworthiness	
	Conclusion	

IV.	FINDINGS.....	96
	Introduction	
	Participant Descriptions	
	Results	
	Conclusion	
V.	DISCUSSION.....	149
	Discussion and Implications	
	Limitations	
	Future Research	
	Conclusion	
	REFERENCES.....	188
	APPENDIX	
	A. Institutional Review Board Approval.....	218
	B. Participant Recruitment Letter.....	220
	C. Invitation to Participate Letter.....	222
	D. Informed Consent.....	224
	E. Interview Materials.....	226
	F. Interview Protocol.....	228
	G. Local Resource List Sample.....	232
	H. Educational Outcomes Handout.....	234
	I. Code Book.....	236
	J. Diagram of Themes.....	243
	K. List of Acronyms	245

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Diagram of Themes

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As leaders, advocates, and agents of systems change, school counselors are positioned to recognize and help mitigate potential barriers to educational success (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012). Childhood trauma and the experiences of being in foster care can be a barrier to a student's educational attainment (Bobbitt & Gershoff, 2016; Fratto, 2016; Perry, 2009). The majority of the existing literature on childhood trauma offers insight into why these young people are unsuccessful. For example, childhood trauma may lead to substantial impact on typical brain development, learning, and has social/emotional implications (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Fritz, 2017; Goldson, 2002; Siegfried, Ko, & Kelley, 2004). Less information is available to guide school counseling practice that provides possible explanations for why some students thrive in school despite their trauma history (Hass & Graydon, 2009). For these youth, post-traumatic growth theory poses a possible explanation for the educational achievement (Meyerson, Grant, Carter, & Kilmer, 2011).

This phenomenological study, *Nevertheless they persisted: Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced trauma and their journey to postsecondary education* is intended to examine the lived kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) educational experiences of former foster youth who are currently enrolled in postsecondary education. By directly capturing the voice of former foster care youth (ages 18-24) who

are enrolled in postsecondary education despite their history of trauma, I provide a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to educational attainment and the potential post-traumatic growth that may have occurred. In interviewing former foster care youth about their past K-12 educational experiences, I shed light on the role school counselors may have played in their education. Investigating this topic is timely because schools, and therefore school counselors, are becoming increasingly accountable for closing the achievement gap for unique populations, such as students in foster care (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016).

Although it is possible for any K-12 student to have experienced trauma, this dissertation is focused on former foster youth, who are unique because they have faced two particular traumas: (a) the circumstances that led to involvement in the foster care system (e.g. child abuse, neglect, death of a parent, etc.), and (b) the removal from the home environment (Cummings, 2016; Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015; Pynoos, Fairbank, & James-Brown, 2011). For this dissertation study, I focused specifically on former foster youth who identify as having a history of trauma at some point during K-12 education, attained a high school credential, and are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program. By focusing specifically on this unique population, I hoped to gain an in-depth retrospective look at each participant's experiences in K-12 education as related to their journey to postsecondary education, the extent to which their school counselor made a difference in their educational outcomes, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth. A rich description of each participant's experiences provides valuable information to school counselors and counselor educators

regarding the experience of educational growth despite of trauma, and the role of advocacy in working with children and youth in foster care.

The following sections in this chapter will provide an introduction to this study. This chapter begins with literature regarding the role of a school counselor as it pertains to closing the achievement gap for vulnerable student populations, and the importance of focusing on educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care. Next, I explore the lack of representation of the youth voice in current foster care research and the benefits of youth representing their own experiences with the K-12 education system. I then provide a brief overview of current trauma-informed school counseling practices. Next, I discuss a rationale for selecting post-traumatic growth theory as the theoretical foundation for this study, especially as it pertains to former foster youth who have achieved a high school credential. Finally, I present the statement of the problem, purpose of the proposed study and research questions, the rationale and significance of the study, assumptions, delimitations, definition of terms used in this study, and conclude with the overall organization of this proposed study.

Role of the School Counselor

The expanding role of a school counselor as a leader and systems change agent goes beyond providing direct services to students and families and includes advocating at a systems level (ASCA, 2012; Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016). School counselors are charged with identifying impediments to student learning and developing practices to effectively close the achievement/opportunity gap (ASCA, 2012). In order to accomplish this, school counselors need to have the foundational knowledge and skills to allow them to take the whole child into account, including the potential impact life circumstances

may have on typical human development and learning (CACREP, 2016; Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006; Courtois & Gold, 2009; Fratto, 2016; Zirkle, Peterson, & Collins-Marotte, 2001). Although the role of a school counselor is to provide comprehensive services that benefit all students, it is particularly important for school counselors to understand the unique needs of historically marginalized and vulnerable student populations (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; Rowley, 2017; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Zirkle, et al., 2001), since these student populations have the largest educational attainment gaps.

The focus on student accountability is relevant for school counselors now more than ever (Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017). In addition to managing the academic, career, social and emotional need of students, school counselors are responsible for collecting data to ensure a data-driven, and empirically supported, school counseling programs (Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Young & Kaffenberger, 2015). School counselors are using this data to improve practices that support academic achievement in order to show how their programs impact the students they serve (Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Young, Dollarhide, & Baughman, 2015). Students in foster care have more educational deficits than any other vulnerable student population (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Forsyth, Asmus, Forsyth, & Stokes, 2012; Fritz, 2017; Goldson, 2002; Siegfried, et al., 2004).

Focusing on the foster care population is timely, given the urgency to improve educational outcomes for this specific group (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2016). The Every Student Succeeds Act was signed into federal law in 2015, and for the first time, provisions that address the educational needs for students in foster care became federal law (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). States are now accountable

for reporting the educational outcomes of youth in foster care as a part of the State report card. The use of data for accountability purposes is a reality in the expanding role of a school counselor, and in order to improve outcomes, school counselors need to have an understanding of all of the factors that potentially impact student outcomes, especially for students in foster care (Bobbitt & Gershoff, 2016; Brown, Brack, & Mullis, 2008; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015).

Educational Attainment Gap for Foster Care Youth

Students who have experienced the foster care system as a result of abuse, neglect, or the loss of a caregiver are at high risk for experiencing adverse life outcomes (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Batsche, et al., 2014). The educational experiences of children and youth in foster care are varied and may diverge substantially from students who have not experienced foster care (Clemens, 2014; Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Rebelez, 2013). Although experiences and duration of time spent in the foster care system differ, a common thread among youth in foster care is a history of trauma (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). The majority of children and youth put in an out-of-home placement have a history of complex trauma, i.e., trauma that continues to reoccur, because of the likelihood of returning to the foster care system or because the foster care homes are sometimes adverse environments (Benbenishty, Siegel, & Astor, 2017; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014).

The educational attainment gap between children and youth in foster care and their non-foster peers continues to be a significant problem (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Clemens & Tis, 2016). Students in foster care are graduating high school at rates far below their non-foster peers (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2016), and the

dropout rate for young people in foster care continues to increase (Clemens, 2014; Colorado Department of Education, 2017). For example, foster students in Colorado have a 4-year graduation rate of 23.6 percent and a dropout rate of 8.3 percent (Colorado Department of Education, 2017). There are studies that attribute poor educational outcomes for youth in foster care to a variety of factors beyond the neurological impacts of trauma, including school mobility, lack of stable living environments, and unmet basic needs (Clemens et al., 2017; Heckman, Humphries, & Mader, 2010; Hudson, 2013; Kirk & Day, 2011). These studies provide useful information about the systemic and individual barriers that exist in education, but provide little information about potential factors that promote educational success.

Youth Voice

School counselors work directly with youth in foster care and are in the position to include the voice of these youth in their work; however, the youth voice is rarely included in the literature (Fargas-Malet, McSherry, Larkin, & Robinson, 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Tobolowsky, Madden, & Scannapieco, 2017). The laws and policies put in place to protect educational rights of children and youth are often informed by research (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2016; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). Although public policies have a direct impact on the lives of students, foster care youth are rarely directly consulted for input (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004; Fargas-Malet, et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). Miller and Collins-Camargo (2016) posit youth in foster care are often regarded as incompetent to reflect on their own situations. The *voice* of foster care youth with a history of trauma is needed in order to more fully understand their experiences,

challenges, and barriers to education (Nybell, 2013). Youth are the experts in their own experiences of trauma during their time in K-12 education, and rarely have an opportunity to have their voice heard (Chapman, et al., 2004; Fargas-Malet, et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007).

Perhaps the most underrepresented voices in the literature are youth who did not experience adverse educational outcomes despite their trauma history, especially from former foster youth (Tobolowsky, et al., 2017). Approximately 20% of youth in the foster care system attend a postsecondary education program (2-year, 4-year college, trade program, etc.) after graduating from high school (Colorado Department of Education, 2017). It is difficult to obtain data on matriculation rates on a national level, as this data is typically obtained by information on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid. This is significantly lower than non-foster students who attend a 2-year, 4-year or trade program at a rate of approximately 56 percent (Colorado Department of Education, 2017). There is a question on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid that asks applicants to indicate if they have been in foster care or a dependent or ward of the court since age 13. Because applicants self-report this information, it is unknown whether all students formerly in foster care are identified in the data (Field, 2017). Of the students who do self-report their foster care status, it is estimated that less than 30% of these youth who enroll in college will earn a degree or certificate in six years (Field, 2017; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016).

Researchers have not illuminated the educational experiences of the small percentage of youth who obtain a high school credential and enroll in postsecondary education (Hunter, Monroe, & Garand, 2014; Riebschleger, et al., 2015). There are youth

who appear to thrive during their K-12 education despite their experience with the foster care system and their trauma history (Batsche, et al., 2014). Trauma researchers have already established the impact of trauma on the brain and learning (Gunaratnam & Alisic, 2017; Henry, 1997; Pechtel & Pizzagalli, 2011; Perry, 2001, 2006; Pratchett & Yehuda, 2011). Gaining a rich description of the experiences of young people, who appear to have persisted in their education despite the impacts of childhood trauma, has yet to be fully explored. Exploring a complete, retrospective view directly from young people who were in foster care, and also identify as someone with a history of trauma, could provide valuable insight into their lived experiences throughout their educational journey.

Trauma-Informed School Counseling

Trauma-informed approaches in schools are a promising strategy in supporting the educational *and* emotional needs of students (Cummings, 2016; Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005; Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). The trauma-informed school counseling literature creates a foundation for this study because school counselors play an integral role in trauma recovery and in promoting a safe learning environment for the students they serve (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Barrett-Kruse, Martinez, & Carll, 1998; Brown, et al., 2008; Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006). The majority of this literature is focused on specific types of trauma experienced in the schools (e.g. result of natural disasters, school shootings, bullying, grief and loss), but fails to give voice of those most impacted; the youth who experienced the trauma (Tobolowsky, et al., 2017). By exploring this topic further, school counselors can learn more about how foster youth persisted in their educational journey despite trauma through the direct experiences of youth, and the role a school counselors may or may not

have played in their educational success. This information may inform counselor educators on training future school counselors to be attuned to the needs of students in foster care (Savitz-Romer, 2012; Wachter & Barrio-Minton, 2012). A phenomenological approach is best suited for this study as it allowed me as a researcher to gain a deeper understanding of how former foster youth experienced K-12 education and persevered to pursue postsecondary education despite trauma directly from those who experienced it—the youth themselves.

Post-Traumatic Growth Theory

Viewing trauma through a strength-based lens recognizes that not all of the outcomes that an individual experiences after trauma are negative (Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, & Laffavor, 2008). According to Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006), “The encounter with a major life challenge can also include an increased sense that one has been tested, weighed in the balance, and found to be a person who has survived the worst, suggesting that one is indeed quite strong” (p. 4, para. 2). *Post-traumatic growth theory* centers on the idea that growth can occur as a result of trauma, and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual’s life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). To this end, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) viewed post-traumatic growth as both a process and outcome, and identified three overarching categories of potential benefits as a result of trauma; changes in self-perception, changes in interpersonal relationships, and a changed philosophy of life.

Post-traumatic growth theory is strengths-based and focuses on the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma have the ability to recover and grow, under the right conditions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). School counselors are in a position to

mitigate the negative impacts of trauma by advocating for students to increase protective factors such as: healthy, supportive relationships with adults; safe, engaging, and supportive learning environments; and intentional curriculum that promotes problem-solving, self-awareness, self-regulation, and relationship skills (Masten, et al., 2008). For students in foster care, the school setting may be the only stable and predictable environment they encounter (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Additionally, school counselors may be some of the few stable and trusted adults in the child's life (Geroski, 2000) and could play a key role in creating the necessary conditions for post-traumatic growth to occur.

Statement of the Problem

School counselors are charged with reducing barriers that impede students from receiving a high-quality education (ASCA, 2012), and yet childhood trauma continues to have a substantial impact on brain development, learning, and ultimately educational outcomes (Perry, 2009). The number of children and youth in foster care who have a history of trauma, and the educational attainment gap for this vulnerable population, continues to grow (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Students in foster care have more educational deficits than any other student population at risk for trauma (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Fritz, 2017; Goldson, 2002; Siegfried, et al., 2004). Despite this fact, little research exists to explore the lived experiences of students with a trauma history related to their education, especially in relation to their experiences in reaching postsecondary education (Fargas-Malet, et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Tobolowsky, et al., 2017).

Researchers generally take a deficit approach to trauma and do not include the possibility that some youth may have experienced growth despite trauma, especially in relation to education (Masten, et al., 2008). Furthermore, no known literature exists to address what role school counselors may, or may not, have played in facilitating educational or emotional growth despite trauma, for students in foster care. The trauma-informed school counseling literature identifies the need for systems that support the academic and emotional needs of students with a history of trauma, yet the majority of the literature is focused on response to the causes of trauma (e.g. bullying, natural disasters, exposure to violence) and does not focus on the youth themselves (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006; Eppler, 2008; Forkey, Morgan, Schwartz, & Sagor, 2016). There is not sufficient literature on trauma-informed school counseling practices, particularly for foster youth (Tobolowsky, et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is a lack of research that explores the experiences of former foster youth in relation to their journey to postsecondary education despite having a history of trauma.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth with a history of trauma as it relates to their journey in reaching postsecondary education, their experiences and interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth. This study focused on gaining a richer understanding of the effects of trauma on their journey and growth despite trauma. In order to accomplish this, I recruited participants who obtained a high school credential and are currently enrolled in postsecondary education. Young people who participated in this study were asked to

reflect on the time they spent in K-12 education in order to provide a retrospective view of their lived experience as a student with a history of trauma and the meaning they constructed through engaging in their social worlds. This study elicited discussion of multiple aspects of trauma as it relates to foster youth's ability to learn and persevere despite the multiple risk factors they encountered during their school experience and the implications for youth who have had similar experiences.

- Q1 What are the experiences of former foster youth who have a trauma history in reaching postsecondary education?
- Q2 How do former foster youth describe their experiences and interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education?
- Q3 What is the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth?

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study is based on the understanding that school counselors are in the position to provide and advocate for a safe learning environment that meets the needs of all learners, including those that have a history of childhood trauma and foster youth (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; Milsom & McCormick, 2015). This study provides a platform to expand the literature on trauma-informed school counseling, and could provide strategies for effective (or ineffective) practices based on the experiences as they relate to youth in the foster care system. Counselor educators could benefit from the results of this study by understanding more about the phenomenon of having a history of childhood trauma in a school setting (Wachter, & Barrio-Minton, 2012). The results of this study provide information to assist school counselor educators to prepare future school counselors to work with students with a history of trauma, particularly students in foster care.

Participants in this study were asked to self-identify as a student with a history of trauma to ensure they are able to speak to the role trauma played in their previous interactions with educators, and school counselors in particular. The rationale for selecting participants who have successfully completed a high school credential, and are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program, is based on the notion that this population of youth formerly in the foster care system at some point during K-12 education: (1) in the position to look back on their time in K-12 education and to reflect on the most relevant aspects of being a student with a history of trauma who persevered despite trauma, and (2) among the small percentage of youth who did not experience adverse educational outcomes in spite of their trauma history and involvement in the foster care system (Batsche, et al., 2014). The foundation of this study is rooted in the assumptions of constructionism in that reality is a social construction and one's reality is shaped by their social worlds through interactions with others (Crotty, 1998). Former foster youth are the experts in their own lives and educational experiences, and are well positioned to inform educators, school counselors, and counselor educators about what it was like to be a foster student with a history of trauma during their educational journey to postsecondary education (Chapman, et al., 2004; Fargas-Malet, et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007).

Federal and State laws and regulations have been put into place in recent years to protect the educational rights of young people in foster care (Every Child Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015). Child welfare agencies and schools are tasked with the responsibility of improving educational outcomes for children and youth in foster care (ESSA, 2015). Adding the youth voice to the literature provides stakeholders with the perspective of

those most impacted by their decisions—the foster youth themselves (Tobolowsky, et al., 2017). With this information, educational stakeholders and policymakers may be able gain more empathy and awareness for what it is like to be a foster care involved youth with a history of trauma in a K-12 environment, and that may result in increases in educational success (Harfeld & Marlowe, 2017). Additionally, study results could potentially inform stakeholders in the education system.

This study also provided the opportunity for participating youth to give voice to the way in which trauma potentially shaped their identity as a student, interactions with school counselors, and growth despite trauma. As in counseling, the process of engaging in qualitative research has the potential to be a cathartic experience (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994). Taking a phenomenological approach provided substantial insight into the educational experiences as they related to trauma for young people in foster care.

Assumptions

It is essential to be transparent about the potential for bias and to bracket my biases at the forefront of this study. As detailed in Chapter III, the following experiences influenced my review of the literature: my previous experiences working with young people in foster care as a school counselor; my status as a Counselor Supervisor and Educator-in-training; and my current role as the State Coordinator for Foster Care Education at the Colorado Department of Education. The fundamental assumption guiding this study is that all children and youth who have experienced foster care have had some form of psychological and/or physical trauma, and the trauma directly impacts their educational experiences (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). Children and youth who enter the foster care system have often experienced complex trauma, and the removal from the

home itself may be exceptionally traumatic (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). This assumption comes from my direct interaction with this population, as well as an understanding of the literature about trauma, post-traumatic growth theory, and educational outcomes for children and youth in the foster care system.

School counselors trained before Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) included trauma as required educational standards for counselor preparation in 2009. Required coursework in counselor training programs, at that time, may not have included sufficient knowledge or training in childhood trauma (Bobby, 2013). Additionally, practicing school counselors trained in non-CACREP programs could be lacking in trauma-informed practices if their programs did not include trauma. The lack of training and knowledge about counseling children who have experienced trauma could directly impact counseling practice (Courtois & Gold, 2009; Minton & Pease-Carter, 2011). Having a better understanding of trauma may expand the knowledge and resources to advocate for students in the foster care system (Bruskas, 2008). Being competent in trauma-informed approaches to working with youth could benefit direct services with students (Fratto, 2016; Rayburn, McWey, & Cui, 2016). This knowledge could be valuable in advocating for students by providing guidance to other educators, including teachers and administrators working directly with children and youth in foster care. Finally, being trauma-informed assists school counselors in supporting students and knowing the appropriate outside referral sources, such as child welfare caseworkers and licensed professional counselors (Zirkle, et al., 2001).

Delimitations

The following delimitations are meant to limit the scope of the study. The participants were limited to youth formerly involved in the foster care system who earned a high school credential and are currently enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (2-year or 4-year college, or Career and Technical Education Program) that is consistent with the definition of institution of higher education as defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. § 1001 et seq.). Participants did not include youth currently in the foster system, as they are not in the position to look back at their experience in K-12 education fully until completion. Participants self-identified as having a history of trauma at some point prior to completing high school as a part of the recruitment process (see Appendix B). The reason for these delimitations were to limit the exploration of trauma, and potential post-traumatic growth, to youth who are among the small percentage students formerly involved in foster care in the process of attaining a postsecondary credential.

Definitions and Terms

Achievement gap: “The difference in the performance between each subgroup as defined by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) within a participating Local Education Agency or school and the statewide average performance of the LEA’s or State’s highest achieving subgroups in reading/language arts and mathematics as measured by the assessments required under ESEA.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Complex trauma: A history of subjection to totalitarian control over a prolonged period (months to years) including, but not limited to, child maltreatment, childhood physical or sexual abuse, and/or sexual exploitation (Herman, 1997).

Educational attainment: An individual's level of education where students earn a high school credential (high school diploma or high school equivalency credential).

Educational stakeholder: For the purposes of this study, the term educational stakeholder is defined as a person involved in a foster child's education.

Examples of an educational stakeholder include, but are not limited to:

educational professional, child welfare professional (such as a caseworker),

juvenile court professional (such as Guardian ad Litem or Court Appointed

Special Advocate), caregiver (such as biological parent or guardian), foster

parent, familial and non-familial significant adults (such as grandparents, aunt or

uncle, close family friend, etc.), school counselor, school administrator, teacher,

or other relevant school professionals involved in the educational experience of a

student in foster care.

History of trauma: Describing an individual who has experienced a single or multiple traumatic experiences during childhood.

Institution of Higher Education: The General Definition of Higher Education as defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965 (20 U.S.C. § 1001 et seq.). For the purposes of this study, an institution of higher education is defined as an institution that admits students with a high school diploma or equivalent certificate of completion into an accredited public or private educational institution that provides not less than a 1-year program of training to prepare students for gainful employment.

Post-traumatic Growth: The experience of positive change that occurs as a result of crises or trauma. It is manifested in changes in self-perception, changes in

interpersonal relationships, and a changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

Public education system: “A Local Education Agency (LEA) is a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties that is recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools.” (U.S. Department of Education, 2017).

Student in foster care: Consistent with the Fostering Connections Act, “foster care” means 24- hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for who the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions and pre-adoptive homes (Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G)(ii)). In this dissertation, this term is also synonymous with foster care student. Although person-first language is preferred, it was sometimes necessary for clarity.

Trauma: The unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions in which an individual’s ability to integrate an emotional experience is overwhelmed and the individual experiences (either objectively or subjectively) is a perceived threat

to his/her life, bodily integrity, or that of a caregiver or family member (Saakvitne, Gamble, Pearlman, & Lev, 2000).

Organization of the Study

This study is presented in five chapters. Chapter I included an introduction to the literature related to the role of a school counselor, educational attainment gaps for students in foster care, the lack of youth voice in the literature, trauma and trauma-informed school counseling, and post-traumatic growth theory. This chapter also includes the statement of the problem, rationale and significance, purpose of the study and research questions, assumptions, delimitations, and definition of terms. Chapter II provides a more thorough review of the literature related to the constructs in this study. Chapter III provides the methodology for this study, description of the sample, procedures, research questions, and qualitative methodology utilized to address the research questions. Chapter IV provides the findings of this study and includes steps taken to promote researcher reflexivity, a description of participants and participant demographics, my general reactions to the study and reactions to each participant, and the results of the study presented through a detailed description of themes that emerged from the data and supporting participant quotes. Chapter V is dedicated to discussion of this phenomenological study. Specifically, this chapter describes the outcomes of this study as related to the guiding research questions and previous literature, practical implications for school counselors and school counselor educators, and foster care education stakeholders. Limitations of this study and future considerations are also explained in this chapter.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a thorough review of the literature that forms the basis for this study. I will present the literature that is relevant to a phenomenological study pertaining to the lived experiences of youth with a history of trauma as it relates to their educational history during K-12 years, identity as a student, and interactions with school counselors. First, I will provide pertinent literature regarding the integral role of a school counselor. This section will address the expanding role of a school counselor in identifying impediments and barriers to learning that contribute to the educational achievement gap, specifically for students in foster care. Next, I explore the underrepresentation of youth voice in the literature, and highlight the need to understand the phenomenon of childhood trauma from the youth directly. I will also address relevant state and foster care legislation as it relates to school counselors and this phenomenological study. I then provide an overview of literature related to trauma considerations of the impact of childhood trauma, trauma-informed school counseling literature, and trauma in relation to school counselor preparedness. The final sections of this chapter will address post-traumatic growth theory as a theoretical underpinning for this study, and a rationale for selecting a phenomenological research approach and relevant supporting literature.

The Role of the School Counselor

Expanding Role of the School Counselor

School counselors have been providing support to students in kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) schools since the 1920's; however, the roles and functions of a school counselor within a school system have changed and expanded dramatically throughout the years and now includes the treatment of trauma in an educational setting (Henderson & Gysbers, 2006). The widespread adoption of the American School Counselor Association's National Model paved the way for school counselors to provide multifaceted supports to students, families and communities (Dahir, 2001). In recent years, the expanding role of a school counselor includes leadership, advocacy and being an agent of systemic change. According to ASCA (2012), school counselors are responsible for providing responsive services to student's emotional and social needs. Examples of these services include: individual and small-group counseling, crisis counseling, referrals, and peer facilitation (ASCA, 2012). In addition, school counselors are expected to recognize and reduce social and academic barriers to education for the young people they serve (ASCA, 2012).

The achievement gap for historically underserved and vulnerable student populations, such as foster care students, continues to grow (Siegfried, et al., 2004; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). School counselors are in the position to provide targeted supports to reduce these gaps and provide support to vulnerable student populations (Williams & Portman, 2014). Williams & Portman (2014) posited school counselors are change agents, and need to advocate for support systems and collaboration within the community to decrease the achievement gap for historically

underserved student populations. The focus on standards based and data-driven school cultures that emerged after the adoption of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2002, and reauthorization through the *Every Student Succeeds Act* in 2015, increased the pressure for school counselors to support academic growth in the students they serve, regardless if there is a history of trauma present (Havlik, Rowley, Puckett, Wilson, & Neason, 2017).

The following sections related to school counseling literature are intended to highlight the major aspects of a school counselor's role in reducing the academic achievement gap for vulnerable student populations, and for foster students in particular. These sections are also intended to provide relevant literature regarding recommended strategies school counselors could use to address the personal, social, academic, postsecondary and career planning needs of the students they serve, including foster care students. Specifically, I will provide an overview of literature related to trauma and childhood trauma, trauma-informed school counseling, and school counselor preparedness. This information will inform Chapter 5, in which I intend to discuss the implications of this study's results.

Educational Attainment Gap for Foster Care Youth and the School Counselor

The American School Counselor Association (2012) asserts school counselors need to have the abilities and skills to understand the school, district and State educational policies, procedures and practices that either support or impede student success. School counselor competencies also include the ability to act as a systems change agent to create an environment promoting and supporting student success (ASCA, 2012). From a systemic perspective, these abilities and skills are essential in creating a

school counseling program that promotes an educational environment that ensures that every student have access and opportunity to a high-quality education (Stone & Dahir, 2015; House & Hayes, 2002). This is especially important given the consequences that result from adverse academic outcomes. For example, students who do not earn a high school credential are subject to economic and social challenges such as lower wages, higher risk of delinquency, higher risk of pregnancy, and are more vulnerable to experiencing trauma (Barrat & Berliner, 2013; Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Batsche, et al., 2014).

As school counselors are becoming increasingly more responsible for student achievement and closing the educational attainment gap (Milsom & McCormick, 2015), it is essential to have the abilities and skills to recognize vulnerable student populations that are at-risk of underachievement (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; Rowley, 2017). Vulnerable student populations, such as students experiencing homelessness, juvenile justice involved youth, students with disabilities, highly mobile students, etc., historically have larger gaps in student achievement (Siegfried, et al., 2004; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). For example, foster students have the lowest high school graduation rate and college matriculation rate out of any other vulnerable student population (Fritz, 2017). Although the dropout rate for students nationwide is decreasing, the dropout rate for students in foster care is steadily increasing (Colorado Department of Education, 2016; National Center for Statistics, 2015). Additionally, recent research indicates that in-school experiences are responsible for the negative academic outcomes experienced by foster youth (Benbenishty, et al., 2017). Having a school counselor that is cognizant of the complex issues that foster students may experience, and providing

intentional in-school support, could make a difference in educational outcomes. Given the important role school counselors have in closing the achievement gap, it is necessary for school counselors to have the training, resources, and skills to address vulnerable student populations from both an individual and systemic perspective (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006). Although these students are clearly at high risk of adverse educational outcomes, Palmieri and LaSalle (2016) noted, “Schools must shift from assuming that these students will be unsuccessful, based on their past, and assume that they will be successful with the appropriate supports are provided” (p.121).

According to ASCA (2012) school counselors can address support student learning by: (a) providing guidance curriculum that addresses all student needs, including closing-the-gap activities that align with school goals; (b) understanding the relationship of academic performance to the world of work, family life, and community services; and, (c) having the knowledge and ability to provide responsive services to students during times of transition, separation, heightened stress, and critical change. Strategies to recognize gaps in achievement, and provide targeted and intentional efforts to reduce them, occur on an individual and systemic level (Young, et al., 2015). This study is intended to inform school counselors about the lived experience of being a student with a history of trauma from the perspective of former foster youth. In addition, the study is meant to inform how former foster youth experienced education from an individual and systemic perspective, especially in relation to their interactions with school counselors. The following literature in this section informs the way in which a school counselor contributes to the individual student and their role in supporting systemic change for vulnerable student populations.

From an individual perspective, school counselors are responsible for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting relevant student data in order to improve student behavior and achievement (ASCA, 2012). Based on this data, school counselors identify and assist students who are not performing at grade level and do not have the opportunities to be successful in school (ASCA, 2012; Milsom & McCormick, 2015). In addition to identifying achievement gaps, school counselors must be able to identify the root of the problem that is causing the gap (social, emotional, academic, developmental, etc.) (Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005; Tessier, O'Higgins, & Flynn, 2017). In order for this to occur, the school counselor needs to be able to address the child's entire system by taking the whole child into account to recognize where the problem originates (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Brown, Dahlbeck, & Sparkman-Barnes, 2006; Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004). Although it would be ideal if all school counselors could fulfill these responsibilities, it is unknown the extent to which school counselors are able to achieve these goals, especially from the perspective of students in need of these services. This study explored the student perspective on school counselors' progress towards targeting impediments to learning.

Special education services. Children in foster care are between 2.5 and 3.5 times more likely to receive special education services than their non-foster peers, and are often placed on Individual Education Plans and 504 plans due to a learning or behavioral disability (Harwick, Lindstrom, & Unruh, 2017). Researchers have commented that it is possible students are being identified as having a disability when in fact the students' learning or behavior has been disrupted due to childhood trauma (Cole, Eisner, Gregory, & Ristuccia, 2013; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Many of the symptoms of disabilities present similarly to reactions to childhood trauma, which could lead to a misdiagnosis of

a disability if professionals do not account for the possibility of trauma (Rayburn, et al., 2016). For example, West, Day, Somers, & Baroni (2014) found students with a trauma history exhibited externalizing behaviors in class. Students with behavioral concerns are often sent out of class and are subject to disciplinary action.

In Colorado, for example, approximately 30% of students in foster care are identified as having some type of disability and out of these 36% are identified as having a Serious Emotional Disability. In comparison, the overall diagnosis of Serious Emotional Disability in all students who are identified as having a disability is 6% (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). It is possible the overrepresentation of Serious Emotional Disability for students in foster care could be trauma related. For example, Perry (2009) posits a child who has experienced trauma may experience a trauma response due to a smell in their immediate environment. Perry notes this is due to pre-cortical processing that the child's brain associates with the trauma and responds accordingly. Trauma responses are often mistaken for disruptive behavior, and often have overlapping symptoms with mental health disorders such as oppositional defiant disorder, attention deficit disorder, anxiety, or depression.

School counselors are often a part of the special education team for students in with Individual Education plans, and are in the position to advocate for the educational needs from a whole child's lens (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008; Trusty & Brown, 2005). Given the role of the school counselor on the IEP team is to serve as an advocate for social/emotional and academic needs of the student, it is essential they are aware of the impact of trauma on the brain, and the possibility that a student may be experiencing a trauma response rather than a mental illness. Having a better understanding of trauma

could allow school counselors to advocate with teachers, parents, and other relevant educational stakeholders to develop a plan to meet the educational needs of the students they serve (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; Harwick, et al., 2017; Rowley, 2017; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). West et al. (2014) suggested using breathing exercises and other grounding techniques to keep students in class and therefore reducing the trauma-related negative behaviors. School counselors are in the position to advocate for these types of strategies and need to inform educational stakeholders (e.g. teachers) about these strategies (Cole, et al., 2013). This study could inform other strategies and insight for school counselors from the youth directly.

Modeling healthy relationships. The idea that an impactful relationship with peers and adults is associated with educational success is not new. Coleman (1988) introduced the idea of *social capital*, which provided a theoretical framework to understand the way in which relationships are associated with academic success. Social capital in education is defined as the relationships and interactions among students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and the school community that support educational success in school (Coleman, 1988). Supportive relationships have been shown to be a key protective factor during K-12 education and in higher education for students in foster care (Biehal, 2012; Day et al., 2012; Dill, Flynn, Hollingshead, & Fernandes, 2012). For example, Hass and Graydon (2009) conducted a study with former foster youth who “beat the odds” and were able to achieve at least junior standing in a four-year institution. The researchers were interested in knowing what factors led to their educational success. Among other protective factors, social support and supportive relationships with caring adults were essential factors that influenced their educational

success (Agneessens, Waege, & Lievens, 2006; Bell & Romano, 2015). For students in foster care, social-emotional wellness is necessary at a foundational level in order to be ready to learn in school (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016). Of equal importance, is the notion that children build new relationships based on their early experiences and attachments (Pianta & Steinberg, 1999. When those attachments involve abuse and neglect, professionals need to be intentional about building trusting relationships that are focused on safety, strengths of the child, and protective factors (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016).

Riggs, Augoustinos, and Delfabbro (2009) also found that supportive and healing relationships with caregivers was shown to assist foster children in their recovery from abuse. Students in foster care need to have a sense of belonging, structure, guidance, and consistency with caregivers as a part of the healing process (Storer et al., 2014). In line with this idea, effective school counselors strive to be consistent and caring adults with all students they serve (Stevens & Wilkerson, 2010). Rios and Rocco (2014) found the relationship with a school counselor made a significant difference in the lives of youth in foster care. Youth in this study noted school counselors willingness to, “go above and beyond what was expected of them as educators” drove them to seek a college degree (Rios & Rocco, 2014, p.231).

In another study that examined high-achieving urban African American high school graduates, Williams and Portman (2014) found former foster youth had several factors that they felt lead to their academic success. The youth had specific recommendations for school counselors to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care, including: inclusion in educational decision making; a desire to have parental involvement; school counselors acting as change agents; and collaboration with the

community to raise a scholar (Williams & Portman, 2014). School counselors are in the position to support students in foster care socially, emotionally, and academically through intentionally connecting with students in foster care (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Barrett-Kruse, et al., 1998; Brown, Brack, & Mullis, 2008; Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006). These supports are essential for students in foster care. These relationships may also assist the school counselor in advocating for the student on an individual, school, and systemic level to ensure students have the necessary supports to achieve academically (Dahir, 2001; Trusty & Brown, 2005; McMahon, Mason, & Paisley, 2009).

Developing trust between a student in foster care and school counselor may be challenging given their vulnerability to past interactions with adults (Riggs, et al., 2009). School counselors have the potential to model a healthy, empathetic relationship for foster care youth because of their specific training in relationship building (Moss, Land, & Tuttle, 2017). Although there is great potential, no current research indicates whether school counselors have been successful in engaging and building healthy relationships with foster care youth or other youth with a history of trauma. This study contributed to the literature by exploring students' perspectives of their relationships with school counselors.

Career counseling and planning for the future. Another role of the school counselor, who seeks to provide whole child support, involves career counseling and planning for the future. As noted in Chapter I, approximately 20% of youth in the foster care system attend college after graduating from high school (Colorado Department of Education, 2016); however, it is difficult to obtain concrete statistics on matriculation rates on a national level, as this data typically obtained by the Free Application for

Federal Student Aid, which asks applicants if they have been in foster care or a dependent or ward of the court since age 13 (Field, 2017). It is estimated that less than 30% of foster youth who enroll in college will earn a degree or certificate in six years, and approximately 14% will finish with a bachelor's degree in that time (Field, 2017; U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Of the youth in foster care who do go matriculate to higher education, the odds they will drop out are almost twice that of their non-foster peers (Morton, 2017). Additionally, Morris (2017) found 11% of women, and only 5% of males who experienced the foster care system obtained a bachelor's degree by age 26. Earning a higher education degree (e.g. 2-year, 4-year degree or vocational certificate) influences future earning potential, employment opportunities, and has broader economic implications for youth in foster care (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2010; Berridge, 2012; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015a; Okpych, 2012).

The role of a school counselor includes providing postsecondary and career planning for the students they serve (ASCA, 2012). In Colorado, state law requires school counselors to develop documented Individual Career and Academic Plans (ICAPs) for all students in grades 6-12 (§ Colorado Revised Statute 22-30.5-525, 2016). School counselors need to be aware of the unique circumstances youth in foster care face as they assist in future planning, and the ICAP is an opportunity for counselors to minimize the effects of school mobility for youth in foster care by paying particular attention to the planning process (Clemens et al, 2017). School counselors have the opportunity to support students in foster care by connecting them to various resources that will assist them for independent living (e.g. scholarships and financial support specific to youth in

foster care, connections to programs and professionals on college campuses, non-profits that support students aging out of foster care, etc.). High school counselors, in particular, are in the position to support foster youth in this transition assisting them in understanding the laws and protections that are there to support their education during K-12 and in postsecondary education program. Still, it remains unknown as to the extent to which foster care students perceive school counselors fulfilling these duties.

School counselors as stakeholder connectors. Despite the growth of knowledge of implications of childhood trauma in foster care, the child welfare field lags behind in implementation (Auslander, McGinnis, Tlappek, Smith, Foster, Edmond, Dunn, 2017). Schools are a neutral place for a multitude of stakeholders involved in a child's life and school counselors are in the position to be a connector between stakeholder groups on behalf of the student (e.g. caseworker, foster parents, Guardian ad Litem, Court Appointed Special Advocates, teachers, etc.) (Stone, D'andrade, & Austin, 2006). Ideally, foster parents, child welfare agencies, schools, and teachers would be trauma-sensitive in their approach to working with children and youth in foster care (Bass, 2017; Forkey et al., 2016; Morgan, et al., 2016); however, this is not the case for many foster care stakeholders involved in educational decision making (Auslander et al., 2017). This is especially important as youths' characteristics and experiences, while in care, also predict educational attainment (Courtney & Hook, 2017). This study adds to the literature regarding foster care youth's perspectives of various stakeholders they encountered during their involvement in the child welfare system, including school counselors.

Youth Voice in the Literature

Throughout this review of the literature, a consistent theme has emerged: there is a dearth of studies that seek out the perspective of foster care youth. Trauma-informed approaches and systems are meant to protect youth in the foster care system, yet the youth voice is rarely included in the literature (Chapman, et al., 2004; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). Clark (2009) posits the lack of foster youth voice in the literature is likely related to difficulty in conducting research with vulnerable populations and gaining access to foster youth. Another consideration for the lack of youth voice is that youth are often regarded as incompetent in their ability to reflect on their own lives, and adult professionals often feel they are protecting youth by not including them (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). Although the literature that includes youth voice is limited, there are several recent studies that indicate consistencies in youth recommendations about education and trauma-informed policies (Chapman, et al., 2004; Clemens et al., 2017; Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Nybell, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Riebschleger, et al., 2015; Tobolowsky, et al., 2017).

Recent literature notes the importance of including youth in decision-making and in literature that informs laws and policies (Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Nybell, 2013; Riebschleger, et al., 2015). Foster care education policies and guidance in both education and in the child welfare field note the importance of including the youth's voice in educational stability decisions (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016). The preference of the child in school placement decisions is among the most important considerations (U.S. Department of Education and U.S.

Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Youth who experience disruption in their home lives value stability and security in their educational settings (Clemens et al., 2107). Considering the trauma and consequences of trauma in education, it is important to take youth wishes into account in relation to school stability to mitigate the risk of further traumatizing events (Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Pecora, 2012).

To this end, in a study about the educational experiences of foster youth, Clemens et al. (2017) found youth had specific recommendations regarding trauma-informed schools. “The teachers and staff need to be trained, and a lot of young people experience a lot of trauma, and so I think it is important to have, like, trauma-informed care training so they understand when kids are behaving in a negative way or they’re acting out instead of trying to discipline them (Clemens et al., 2017, p. 74).” These findings from youth participants are consistent with previous studies regarding the impact of trauma on learning, and the importance of educators recognizing how trauma influences the educational experience (Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Nybell, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Riebschleger, et al., 2015). As introduced previously, the consequences of trauma may not necessarily be negative, and this study aims to provide young people who experienced educational success in spite of their trauma history to have their voices heard. Through the application of phenomenological research methods, this study contributed the voice of foster care youth to the academic literature where it is currently lacking.

State and Federal Foster Care Legislation

In serving youth in foster care, it is important for school counselors to understand the relevant legislation that directly affects their roles and responsibilities in addition to

the daily lived-experiences of these students. In 2008, the Fostering Connections Act (FCA) was signed into federal law with the intent of improving educational stability for children and youth in the foster care system (FCA, 2008). This act required State and local child welfare agencies to consider educational stability in placement decisions, and make an effort to keep a child in their school of origin in the event of an out-of-home placement (FCA, 2008, Section 204.a.1). In response to this law, Colorado passed Colorado Revised Statute 22-32-138 to include educators as a partner in implementing aspects of the Fostering Connections Act. To support these efforts, the Foster Care Education Program was established bridge the gap between educators and child welfare to serve the educational needs of children and youth in foster care, specifically in regards to educational stability (Colorado Department of Education). Colorado became one of the first states to have a dedicated position at the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), which allowed for advocacy for FCA in local education agencies. Participant selection will be covered in detail in Chapter III; however, it is important to note the laws that pertain to Colorado specifically as participants in this study have attended a K-12 school in Colorado during their time in foster care.

In December of 2015, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) was signed into law, and for the first time, educational protections for children and youth in foster care became a part of federal education law (Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1000, et seq., 2015). The intent of educational stability policies and laws is to create an opportunity for students in foster care to have continuity in their education in the event of an out-of-home placement (U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). The foster care education literature base indicates that

students in foster care enter school academically behind, make less academic progress than their non-foster peers, and experience with placement changes and school moves interfere with a stable and adequate education (Clemens, Lalonde, & Sheesley, 2016; Clemens et al, 2017; Cutuli, Desjardins, Herbers, Long, Heistad, Chan...& Masten, 2013; Pecora, Jensen, Romanelli, Jackson, & Ortiz, 2009). Specifically, Clemens, Klopfenstein, Tis, and Lalonde (2017) found that two placement changes were equivalent to three school changes, three placement changes equaled five school changes, and five placement changes equaled eight school changes. Furthermore, the odds of graduating with their class dropped with each school move (Clemens et al., 2017). Fostering Connections and ESSA protect two out of three school changes (Clemens et al., 2017), making educational stability for students in foster care than before the adoption of the laws.

School Counselor's Understanding Legislation and Foster Care Programs

The implications of these laws and understanding of educational stability research for school counselors are related to the direct and indirect services they provide (Graham, Schellinger, & Vaughn, 2015; McCabe, 2018). Some of the key school counselor roles and responsibilities related to these laws and supporting literature include: (a) make efforts to reduce the achievement gap for vulnerable student populations (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2016; Singh, et al., 2010); (b) attend to the academic needs of the student through reducing barriers to student success (Milsom & McCormick, 2015); (c) advocate for systemic change through providing students with a comprehensive school counseling program (Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Rowley, 2017); (d) provide students with the

skills necessary to plan for and access postsecondary and career opportunities (Rowley, 2017); and (e) provide responsive services that address students social and emotional needs (e.g. crisis situations).

School counselors can play an integral role in reducing the academic achievement gap for historically underserved students (Siegfried, et al., 2004; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Foster students have the largest educational achievement gap compared to any other vulnerable student population. For example, the 4-year completion rate (attainment of a diploma or high school equivalency) for students in foster care is 37.4 percent, which is significantly lower than the completion rate for any other vulnerable population such as students experiencing homelessness (55%) or students with disabilities (56.8%) (Colorado Department of Education, 2016). It is essential that school counselors are aware of the policies and laws that are in place to improve academic achievement (Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Young, et al., 2015). Furthermore, school counselors need to have a foundational knowledge of the potential barriers to obtaining a quality education, such as childhood trauma (Williams, Steen, Albert, Dely, Jacobs, Nagel, & Irick, 2015).

Under ESSA, it is assumed that it is in the child's best interest to remain in their school of origin when possible (ESSA, 2015). Frequent placement and school moves can present a barrier for students (Clemens, et al., 2016); however, school and child welfare stakeholders can work together to minimize the disruption for the student (Clemens et al., 2017). As noted previously, school counselors are in the position to serve as connectors for a seamless transition in the event of a school move (Cox, 2012). For example, school

counselors can work with the sending school to ensure timely transfer of records and help the child adjust to the new school environment.

Advocating for systemic change with teachers, administrators, and other relevant school stakeholders could ease the transition for students in foster care in a new school environment (Bobbitt & Gershoff, 2016; Zirkle, et al., 2001; Tessier, et al., 2017; Vasileva & Petermann, 2016). For students who remain in their school of origin, school counselors can advocate on the students behalf to ease the social, emotional, and academic consequences that could occur as a result of being removed from their home (Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). Making intentional counselor-student connections could make the difference for them emotionally and socially (Petrenko, Culhane, Garrido, & Taussig, 2011; Rome & Raskin, 2017; Rowley, 2017).

These connections also include assisting the student with academic, postsecondary, and career planning (Rowley, 2017). This is particularly important for students in foster care given the academic gaps that are often associated with multiple school moves (Clemens, Sheesley, & Lalonde, 2016; Clemens et al., 2017; McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, & Thompson, 2003). Harper and Schmidt (2016) found that tutoring programs made a difference in closing academic gaps for students in foster care. Knowledge of federal, state, and postsecondary institutional resources to support students in foster care after high school is also important for school counselors (Young, et al., 2015). For example, the Chaffee Foster Care Independence Program was created to assist youth in successfully emancipating from the foster care system and to provide ongoing support for independent living (Children's Bureau, 2016).

A school counselor's relationship with child welfare agencies does not have to be limited to suspected child abuse and neglect reports (Kenny & Abreu, 2016). The federal law that requires schools and child welfare agencies to have a partnership to improve educational outcomes for foster students serves as an opportunity for school counselors to establish a connection between multiple systems of care (ESSA, 2015). Connecting with multiple systems of care can allow the school counselor to best serve the needs of the students they serve in within an ASCA framework (Nitza, Fineran, & Dobias, 2015). Specifically, school counselors can also use this knowledge to provide responsive services to the student, which includes attending to the social and emotional reactions to being a part of the foster care system (ASCA, 2012; Nitza, et al., 2015).

Trauma

The word "trauma" stems from the Greek word meaning "wound" (ACA, 2016). The idea of psychological trauma was first introduced to the literature after World War I when soldiers returned from war suffering emotional consequences of war, initially defined as "shell shock" (Herman, 1997). Since this time, there has been substantial research and advances in the understanding of psychological trauma (e.g., Briere & Scott, 2014; Courtois & Gold, 2009; Dass-Brailsford, 2007, Perry 2001, 2006, 2009). Advances in technology have also allowed researchers to learn much more about the neurological impacts of trauma that will be further described in the section below, "Childhood Trauma" (e.g., Perry, 2001, 2006).

Definition of Trauma

Organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Counseling Association, and the American School Counseling Association have

responded to this research through guidance and technical assistance to the field. The most recent edition of the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (DSM-5) defines trauma as:

Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways: (1) Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s); (2) witnessing, in person, the event(s) as it occurred to others; (3) learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend—in cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental; (4) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event(s) (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013).

Although this definition can assist clinicians and clients alike in conceptualizing the psychological experience, Briere and Scott (2014) assert that this definition is limiting as it does not consider events to be traumatic if they are not life threatening. Furthermore, this definition fails to include extreme emotional abuse, major losses, separation, or a number of other factors that have been shown to be associated with risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder (Briere & Scott, 2014). In contrast, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration's (SAMSHA) asserts that trauma:

...results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (SAMSHA, 2014, para. 2).

Similarly, the definition of "trauma" in this study includes events that are "perceived threats" to life, bodily integrity, or that of a caregiver or family member (Saakvitne et al., 2000).

Childhood Trauma in Foster Care

The former foster youth, who were the focus of this study, have experienced childhood trauma. Whether the trauma is limited to the circumstances that led to removal

from their caregiver and the removal itself, or whether there is a history of complex childhood trauma before involvement in the foster care system, foster youth enter into the educational system with a history of trauma (Geroski, 2000). Although trauma is inevitable, given the circumstances that lead a young person to be removed from the home and the removal from the home itself (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014), not *all* former foster youth may identify as having a history of trauma. For example, a child may enter the foster care system as a result of a death of a parent as an infant. This individual experienced the trauma of the death of a parent and being placed in a foster home, but may not identify as having a history of trauma. To account for this, participants in this study self-identified as having a history of trauma at some point during their K-12 educational experience.

It is important to understand the potential effects of childhood trauma that are documented in the literature in order to better conceptualize the individuals who choose to participate in this study. Although each individual's experience is unique, childhood trauma is an unfortunately common experience that can have lasting developmental consequences (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). Stevens (2013) estimates nearly 35 million children in the United States have experienced one or more types of childhood trauma. The implications of childhood trauma have consequences during childhood, affecting the child's ability to learn and socialize, and these effects endure into adulthood (Danese, Moffitt, Harrington, Milne, Polanczyk, Pariante,...& Caspi, 2009; Tishelman, Haney, O'Brien, & Blaustein, 2010).

Childhood trauma and learning implications. Childhood trauma has the potential to have a significant impact on learning outcomes, especially for children and

youth in foster care (Perry, 2009). A child's neurobiology can be significantly impacted in the case of physical or emotional abuse, as this is the most vulnerable point in human development (Gunaratnam & Alisic, 2017; Henry, 1997; Pechtel & Pizzagalli, 2011; Perry, 2001, 2006; Pratchett & Yehuda, 2011). Childhood trauma has been associated with smaller hippocampal volume in adulthood and persistent changes in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, which is connected to emotional regulation and mood disorders (Vythilingam, Heim, Newport, Miller, Anderson, Bronen...& Bremner, 2002). Speech, motor functioning, social, emotional, and the child's ability to regulate behavior are all impacted by traumatic experiences (Anda et al., 2006; Perry, 2009; Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000). Streeck-Fischer and van der Kolk (2000) explain that traumatized children "are easily over stimulated and cannot achieve the state of secure readiness that is necessary in order to be open to new information" (p. 912). In this vein, children who have a trauma history often have difficulty in social skills, self-esteem and reading (Perry, 2009).

Although the consequences of childhood trauma are severe, there is evidence that recovery from trauma can occur under the right circumstances, particularly for children (Perry, 2004, 2009). The brain during childhood is understood as having more "neuroplasticity," a term that describes the brain's ability to "change in response to experiences" (Mundkur, 2005, p. 988). Donald Hebb also advanced the idea of "neuroplasticity" with his theory that "neurons that fire together, wire together" (Mundkur, 2005, p. 988). Essentially, research into the neurobiology of children has established that a child's brain is more vulnerable to the effects of trauma than the adult brain, and it also has the ability to recover more quickly under the right circumstances

(Belsky, Jaffee, Sligo, Woodward, & Silva, 2005; Benoit, Zeanah, & Barton, 1989; Caliso & Milner, 1992; Gorman, Leifer, & Grossman, 1993; Perry, 2009). Childhood is a “critical period” during which “crucial experiences” can have a peak effect on neural development (Mundkur, 2005, p. 856). School counselors can use this information to understand how trauma impacts typical human development and the potential effects on learning to create a trauma-informed learning environment for students (Taylor, 2017).

Trauma and supportive relationships. Creating an environment where traumatized children feel safe, connected, and have access, to meaningful and healthy relationships is key in recovery (Herman, 1997; Perry, 2006, 2009; Pianta, 1999; Osher, 2002; Wolpov, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2009). Healthy relationships benefit social-emotional brain development (i.e., the part of the brain responsible for relationship skills) (Bobbitt & Gershoff, 2016). Perry (2006) asserted strong and supportive ties within a social network serves as a protective factor for psychological outcomes for children who have experienced trauma. Perry found that these relational ties within a child’s network improved cognitive functioning in the brain and assisted in recovery from previous traumas (Perry, 2006, 2009). Relationships with peers and supportive adults during middle and high school play an especially important role in developing self-identity and self-esteem (Akos & Galassi, 2004; Herbers, Reynolds, & Chen, 2013). Social connectedness is also an important factor in education, as research indicates students who have healthy connections with peers and adults are more likely to have successful academic outcomes (Cole, et al., 2013; Osher, 2002; Terr, 2003). An additional protective factor for students in foster care is the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities, as this creates additional opportunities to connect with peers outside of an

academic environment (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016). School counselors are in the position to facilitate environments for all students to develop meaningful relationships, and this is particularly crucial for students who have experienced trauma.

Counselor Education Programs: School Counselor Preparedness in Trauma

It is essential for school counselors to have adequate education and training in order to address the needs of traumatized students in a school setting (Courtois & Gold, 2009; Lokeman, 2011; Stewart-Spencer, 2010). According to CACREP (2016), counselors are trained in eight common core curricular areas, which are: (a) professional counseling orientation and ethical practice, (b) social and cultural diversity, (c) human growth and development, (d) career development, (e) counseling and helping relationships, (f) group counseling and group work, (g) Assessment and testing, and (h) research and program evaluation (CACREP, 2016, p.10). Although trauma is included in the 2016 CACREP Standards, trauma researchers recognize the need for more trauma related education by including trauma-specific coursework and skills training for school counselors and mental health counselors (Courtois & Gold, 2009; Minton & Pease-Carter, 2011; Eberts, 2010; Henriksen Jr., Nelson, Watts, 2010; Lokeman, 2011; Stewart-Spencer, 2010; Wachter & Barrio-Minton, 2012). Additionally, the 2016 CACREP Standards related to trauma are new and broadly written. The standards incorporate language specific to counselor education to address topics such as crises, disaster, or other trauma-causing events, however, there are no specific competencies listed (CACREP, 2016).

Minton and Pease-Carter (2011) found counselor education programs do not spend enough time preparing students for eventual crises they will encounter in the field, and counselor-training programs need to increase attention to crisis, disaster, and trauma substantially. Similarly, Goodman-Scott (2015) found a significant gap in school counselor preparation programs and actual job responsibilities related to addressing social/emotional concerns of students. Henriksen, et al., (2010) asserted that, “as the counseling field evolves, and as clients seek help for increasingly complex problems, graduate programs will be required to update coursework to meet new demands” (p. 48). Childhood trauma is clearly a complex problem that can have lasting neurological, social, and educational effects (Perry, 2001, 2006). Literature related to school counselor preparedness indicates a need for counselor educators to adequately prepare counselors to address a variety of social/emotional needs and crisis situations for the students they serve (Goodman-Scott, 2015; Henriksen, et al., 2010; Minton & Pease-Carter, 2011).

Trauma-specific training is especially important for school counselors given that nearly 60% of students have experienced some type of trauma (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016). The collaborative relationship between school counselor and student is especially essential in building trust and addressing potential issues of abandonment in traumatized individuals (Courtois & Gold, 2009; Herman, 1997; Zirkle, et al., 2001). Considering that students in foster care often have a history of complex trauma (Forkey, et al., 2016; Geroski, 2000; Day et al., 2017), school counselors could benefit from more specific training in addressing their particular person, social, and academic needs. This study explores the personal educational experiences of former foster care youth in an effort to address this gap in the literature and, although the results are not transferable, the rich

description provides school counselor educators with more information on practices that may be helpful or harmful to students with this experience of childhood trauma.

Trauma-Informed School Counseling

The literature illustrates that childhood trauma can substantially affect a child's ability to learn and socialize and that positive relationships are a protective factor in children with a history of trauma (Sippel, Pietrzak, Charney, Mayes, & Southwick, 2015). Given the importance of positive relationships, there is an important role for school counselors in the treatment of childhood trauma (Lemberger, Selig, Bowers, & Rogers, 2015). School counselors are trained in developing healthy, therapeutic relationships with children from a variety of diverse backgrounds (Stone & Dahir, 2015). Despite this training, and the potential for school counselors to be on the frontlines of identifying and treating children with a history of trauma, there has historically been little additional guidance given to school counselors as to how to approach trauma in the educational environment (Martin, Ashley, White, Axelson, Clark, & Burrus, 2017).

Although there is a growing body of trauma-related literature in the counseling field, very little research exists related trauma in the school counseling literature. This gap in the literature is significant, given school counselors role in responding to crisis and are often involved in the aftermath of childhood trauma in the school setting (Milsom & McCormick, 2015; Williams, et al., 2015; Zirkle, et al., 2001). School counselors could play a critical role in supporting students with a history of trauma, both emotionally and socially, and also academically (Havlik, et al., 2017).

Ultimately, recent research shedding light on the neurological and psychological impacts of trauma and the expanding role of the school counselor have led to the

movement for trauma-informed school counseling practices (Cooper & Wortman, 2017; Martin, et al., 2017). There has been a large push to incorporate trauma-informed practices into day-to-day tasks for school counselors, to some degree of success (Brown et al., 2008; Fontes, 2000; Park & Peterson, 2008; Williams & Portman, 2014). School-aged children and youth spend the majority of the day interacting with educators who are responsible for creating a safe and inclusive learning environment. In order to create this environment, many schools across the United States (U.S.) have adopted trauma-informed approaches and practices (Kenny, Vazquez, Long, & Thompson, 2017). Although these practices are promising, students have not historically had access to trauma-informed school environments and have often been re-traumatized as a result (Purtle & Lewis, 2017). There is a clear need for trauma-informed approaches in schools, and school counselors have the opportunity to lead trauma-informed efforts by serving students through a comprehensive school counseling program (Barrett-Kruse, et al., 1998).

School counselors are often involved in the aftermath of a crisis, and it is essential for them to be prepared to provide trauma-informed responsive services (Fontes, 2000). ASCA (2016) asserts that an effective school counselor “demonstrates an ability to provide counseling for students during times of transition, separation, heightened stress, and critical change” (III –B-3e). In recent years, school counselors have reported spending the majority of their time on attending to the social and emotional needs of students (Havlik, et al., 2017). Given the prevalence of childhood trauma and social/emotional issues, it is even more important for school counselors to have the skills necessary to meet student needs (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016; Young, et al., 2015).

An effective trauma-informed school environment creates a culture of safety and understanding, and involves a whole school system. School counselors have the opportunity to help establish this culture through leadership and advocacy. Advocacy is an essential role of school counselors to inform teachers about the needs of traumatized students in order to facilitate a learning environment that will meet their needs (Cooper & Wortman, 2017; Martin, et al., 2017). Having a trauma-informed lens allows counselors to create the conditions necessary for stakeholders to have empathy and understanding for students who have experienced trauma (Cooper & Wortman, 2017).

On a larger scale, school counselors serve as leaders and systems change agents to promote a trauma-informed environment that establishes a safe and welcoming environment for all students. These efforts could allow school counselors to act effectively in closing the achievement/opportunity gap for *all* students. Still, more research must be done to ascertain the effectiveness of this push for trauma-informed practices from the perspective of students being served (Hemmings, 2016). Effective school counseling practices could assist in creating a learning environment that promotes safety and connectedness that facilitates social, emotional, and academic growth for traumatized students (Cooper & Wortman, 2017). This study explores the possibility that former foster students experienced growth despite their trauma history.

Post-Traumatic Growth Theory

Although it is true that the majority of the literature related to trauma and trauma-related outcomes are focused on the negative aspects of trauma, there is some research (including research documenting neuroplasticity) that focuses on the potentially positive outcomes of trauma (Ickovics, Meade, Kershaw, Milan, Lewis, & Ethier, 2006; Milan,

Ritt-Olson, & Unger, 2004). The aftermath of trauma is not always negative for survivors (Dainig & DePanfilis, 2007; Kilmer, 2006; Levine, Laufer, Stein, Hamama-Raz, & Solomon, 2009). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) define “post-traumatic growth” as the personal experience of growth following a highly stressful or traumatic life circumstance. Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) posit, “The idea that difficult life struggles can lead human beings to change, sometimes in radically positive ways, is neither recent nor something that was ‘discovered’ by social and behavioral researchers or clinicians” (p.2). The idea of positive change or growth as a result of suffering is deeply rooted in ancient literature and philosophy and emerged in the literature in the 20th century primarily related to grief and loss (Caplan, 1964; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Frankl, 1963; Maslow, 1964; Yalom, 1980).

The positive psychology movement emerged in the 1990’s and began to focus specifically on the construct of trauma with the early research on post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) asserted, “The encounter with a major life challenge can also include an increased sense that one has been tested, weighed in the balance, and found to be a person who has survived the worst, suggesting that one is indeed quite strong” (p. 4). Post-traumatic growth was initially divided into three general domains: changes in the perception of self, changes in the experience of relationship with others, and changes in one’s general philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). A subsequent factor analysis (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) led to five domains related to post-traumatic growth and was updated to include: personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life, and spiritual change (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). When these factors are present, individuals who have experienced

trauma are much more likely to report post-traumatic growth than those without such factors (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Personal strength. Trauma survivors may experience an increased sense of personal strength, of one's capacities to survive and prevail after the trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). This characteristic is often referred to in literature as "resilience" (Davidson-Arad & Navaro-Bitton, 2015). Although Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker (2000) note the importance of differentiating the two constructs. Post-traumatic growth refers to a growth process by which survivors of trauma are personally transformed as a result of the trauma, and these positive changes go far beyond coping with adversity, thus drawing on their personal strength (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

New possibilities. Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) describe new possibilities as a response to trauma as the individual's ability to develop new interests, partake in new activities, and embark on new adventures or a new life trajectory. This area of growth is often referred to as, "vulnerable yet stronger" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014, p. 4). People who experience this type of growth may embark on a career that is related to their trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). An example in relation to this study, would be a youth in foster care who later becomes a social worker.

Relating to others. This is the idea that trauma-survivors may feel a greater connection to people in general. The individual may have an increased sense of compassion or empathy towards other people who have experienced trauma or suffering (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). This trait is also associated with a greater degree and frequency of performing altruistic acts for others (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). This idea is consistent with Clemens et al. (2017) findings that indicated foster care youth showed a

desire to give back to others who have experienced similar situations to their own.

Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) also note that individuals also experience a greater sense of intimacy, closeness, and freedom to be oneself in the aftermath of a traumatic event. This is particularly important to note for educators working with youth who have experienced trauma, as students could be seeking ways to give back, be involved, and form new meaningful relationships with adults and peers (Milam, et al., 2004).

Appreciation of life. Individuals experiencing post-traumatic growth often describe having a changed sense of what is important in life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). They have a change in priorities, and what was once viewed as small or trivial, could be of great value and importance after the trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). For example, a child may have viewed having dinner with a family member as routine, but after the loss of a parent, they may value anytime spent with family more than in the past. It is possible this change in focus and appreciation could extend to the way in which traumatized students approach education.

Spiritual change. Trauma survivors may experience more existential questions about life's purpose and the need to make sense of life after the traumatic experience(s) than before (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Individuals often experience a greater sense, or more focused, approach to life through post-traumatic spiritual growth (Meyerson, et al., 2011). The meaning one places on spirituality is unique to the individual, but in the context of post-traumatic growth, often includes the need to make sense of one's life and purpose post-trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Studies of post-traumatic growth in foster care youth. After a thorough review of the literature, there is clearly an underrepresentation of the youth perspective through

the lens of post-traumatic growth (Ickovics et al., 2006; Milam, et al., 2004). The voice of youth in foster care related to post-traumatic growth does not exist in the literature base. There are limited studies regarding post-traumatic growth in youth who have experienced child maltreatment (Lev-Wiesel, Amir, & Besser, 2004; Meyerson, Grant, Carter, & Kilmer, 2011; Woodward & Joseph, 2003), and there are no studies to date that are related to the educational experiences of former foster youth in relation to post-traumatic growth. There are, however, associated studies to suggest that positive adult mentoring relationships tend to lead to resilience and positive outcomes for youth in foster care (Ahrens, DuBois, Richardson, Fan, & Lozano, 2008; Collins, Spencer, & Ward, 2010; Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007; Daining & DePanfilis, 2007). In this study, addressed the gap in the current literature by exploring the essence of a former foster youth's experience as a student with a trauma history in K-12 education and with their school counselors in particular.

Phenomenological Research

Remler and Van Ryzin (2010) suggested, “[i]n an important sense, good quantitative research is based on good qualitative research” (p.12). I considered both quantitative and qualitative strategies when evaluating the potential design for this study and concluded a qualitative, specifically a phenomenological, approach was the most appropriate research design. A review of the literature in this chapter revealed there is lack of research representing the topic of foster youths' experiences with trauma in a K-12 setting, particularly in relation to interactions with school counselors. The gap in the literature indicates this topic has not been widely studied qualitatively or quantitatively,

and as a result, I concluded a qualitative study is a logical first step in understanding this phenomenon.

Trusty & Brown (2005) asserts that phenomenological research is needed when little is known about a research area or target population, and the goal is to capture the essence of a particular phenomenon constructed by those who have lived experience with the phenomenon. Merriam (2009) suggested, “Phenomenology is well suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences” (p.9). Given the intense nature of trauma, I felt a phenomenological design was an appropriate way to approach the research with these particular participants. Other qualitative methods such as narrative, which could best tell a sequential story of the life experience of foster youth, or a case study approach (Merriam, 2009), that could examine foster youth as a bounded system in education, were considered; ultimately, I decided the best approach to examine the lived experience of foster youth with a history of trauma is a phenomenological methodology (Moustakas, 1994).

Although other qualitative methods were considered, I arrived at five main reasons for selecting a phenomenological approach in this study, as opposed to other qualitative research methods: (1) the importance of context in understanding this phenomena through lived experience; (2) a desire to understand the meaning participants assigned on their past experiences as a student with a history of trauma while they were of school age; (3) a desire to honor youth’s voice who have experienced trauma that resulted in becoming involved in the foster care system, who are vastly underrepresented in the literature (Chapman, et al., 2004; Fargas-Malet, et al., 2010; Fox & Berrick, 2007); (4) to explore potential posttraumatic growth during participant’s lived educational

experiences (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1996); and (5) the idea that trauma can best be studied using a phenomenological approach (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), and engaging in qualitative research could even be a cathartic experience for participants (Hutchinson, et al., 1994).

Context

Understanding context in regards to educational experiences for foster youth is an essential component of this study because of the influence trauma has on human development and learning (Chibbaro & Jackson, 2006; Courtois & Gold, 2009; Fratto, 2016; Zirkle, et al., 2001). As mentioned previously, research on the impact trauma has on typical childhood development has been established. Research in neuroscience has shown the impact on the ability to receive and retain information before and after a traumatic event, particularly in children (Perry, 2009). What scientific research lacks in this area is the full context of an individual's experience with trauma in an educational setting. Phenomenological research allows for the ability to explore the context in order to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Calhoun & Tedeschi (2006) suggest that both quantitative and qualitative studies are of value in post-traumatic growth, by stating, "Although the approaches of qualitative investigators and of scientifically oriented quantitative researchers can be viewed as contradictory and, perhaps, mutually exclusive (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we see great potential for studies that use both qualitative and quantitative methods in the same investigation" (p. 16).

Meaning

Moustakas (1994) asserted that intentional experience incorporates thought, perception, memory, judgment, and feeling. Former foster youth are the experts in their

own trauma history and assign individual meaning to complex and emotional experiences they had during their K-12 education. The subjective experience of education is unique to all learners, and in this study, I seek to gain a rich and thick description of the worldview foster youth had during their K-12 education. Phenomenological research provides the researcher with the ability to understand the meaning one has constructed and the opportunity to take a rich description of their worldview based on the participants' insider perspective (Merriam, 2009). Husserl & Frege (1977) asserted, "For me the world is nothing other than what I am aware of and what appears valid in my cognitions...I cannot live, experience, think, value, and act in a world which is not in some sense in me, and drives its meaning and truth from me." (1975, p.8). Phenomenology puts an emphasis on the subjective essence of the individual's experience by deriving data from what appears in consciousness (Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, Husserl defined objective reality as the presence of what appears to an individual and can be only be recognized subjectively by the person perceiving their own reality (Moustakas, 1994; Husserl, 1970). As mentioned previously, the lack of representation of youth voice and experience in foster care research means most of what informs policy and practice is lacking data from lived experience from the most important population—the foster youth. I chose a phenomenological methodology to seek understanding of the essence of what it was like to be a student with a trauma history in K-12 education although navigating the complexities of the foster care system.

Youth Voice

The lack of youth voice in foster care research, particularly related to trauma, is likely due to researcher access to this vulnerable population and concern of re-

traumatization during the interview process. I will explain more about my epoche in Chapter III, but it is important to note the unique position I am in as a researcher to conduct this study ethically and with fidelity in regards to these concerns. I hope to center youths' voices, and honor their experiences in the hopes of improving the education for children and youth in foster care.

Traumatic Growth

As noted earlier in this chapter, there is even less research about the potential of traumatic growth for youth in foster care (Ickovics et al., 2006; Milam, et al., 2004). There are no known research studies to explore the potential for traumatic growth during the K-12 educational experience for youth in foster care. I will discuss the sampling procedures for this study in detail in Chapter III, but it is important to note that I am seeking participants that graduated with a high school diploma or equivalent certificate and are currently enrolled in a postsecondary program. It is possible these youth experienced post-traumatic growth at some point during their K-12 experience, which allowed them to be a part of the small percentage of foster youth who achieved academic success in spite of being in foster care.

Cathartic Experience

Finally, Hutchinson, et al. (1994) postulated that participating in qualitative research could even be a cathartic experience. The concern for re-traumatization during the interview process is a potential factor in the underrepresentation of youth voice related to traumatic experiences in the literature. The potential for a cathartic experience

for youth, particularly for youth who may have experienced post-traumatic growth, and my qualifications as a counselor reduce the risk for re-traumatization of participants.

Conclusion

This chapter was intended to provide readers with a comprehensive review on the literature as it pertains to this phenomenological study. Existing school counseling literature was explored in relation to the role of a school counselor as a systems change agent in identifying potential barriers to education that contribute to the educational achievement gap for students in foster care. The underrepresentation of youth voice in the literature was explored, and highlighted a need to gain a further understanding on the implication of childhood trauma from the youth directly. Existing school counselor literature was explored in relation to the individual and systemic approaches in responding to traumatized youth, as well as an overview of current trauma-informed approaches in schools. A review of posttraumatic growth theory and related literature to this study provided a theoretical basis for understanding the possibility that foster youth could potentially experience growth as a result of trauma. Finally, it was established that a phenomenological approach is best suited for this study. In Chapter III, I will discuss phenomenological research methods and provide a framework for this proposed study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

A review of the literature established a need for more research on this subject, particularly for students in foster care. For these reasons, the epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and procedures were selected in order to capture the subjective aspects of youth who were formerly in foster care and their past experiences with trauma during their kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) education. Although trauma is a connecting and common factor for youth in foster care, the lived experiences are unique to the individual and shaped by societal experiences. I chose to approach this study through constructionist epistemology, as constructionism is rooted in the notion that reality is a social construction, not an objective truth, which exists within the individual's perspective. From a constructionist epistemology, one's reality is shaped by society and interactions with others (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Consistent with these ideas, posttraumatic growth theory is based on the idea that an individual experiences a change in perspective of their assumptive world after experiencing trauma. Lastly, procedures were chosen consistent with a phenomenological method, respect the unique perspective of individual participants, while discovering commonalities of educational experiences as students with a history of trauma.

Research Questions

This study's research questions are as follows:

- Q1 What are the experiences of former foster youth who have a trauma history in reaching postsecondary education?
- Q2 How do former foster youth describe their experiences and interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education?
- Q3 What is the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth?

Research Design

Crotty (1998) proposed that researchers ask themselves four essential questions to guide and design a qualitative study: (1) What *methods* do we propose to use? (2) What *methodology* governs our choice and use of methods? (3) What *theoretical* perspective lies behind the methodology in question? (4) What *epistemology* informs this theoretical perspective? (p. 2). With this in mind, I will address each one of these questions in reverse order to provide the justification for the methods and methodologies used in this study.

Epistemology

Constructionism

According to Crotty (1998), epistemology is, “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (p. 3). Constructionism is a worldview by which human knowledge, meaning, and reality is theorized to be constructed by the individual based on their subjective social interactions and environment (Crotty, 1998). Crotty (1998) asserted there are three key assumptions in constructionism: (1) people construct meanings as they engage in the world in which they

are interpreting; (2) humans make sense of the world based on their historical and social perspectives; and (3) meaning is generated through social interactions.

These assumptions apply to this study in that, youth in foster care construct meaning based on their subjective historical perspective of the interactions they had in the K-12 environment. From a constructionist lens, foster youth engaged in the K-12 educational environment, and sense and meaning was generated through social interactions within that world. Although having a trauma history is a common experience of all participants in this study, each individual had their own historical and social perspectives of how their experience with trauma influenced their worldview. Each participant had a unique history of social interactions with peers and adults in the education system. Constructionist epistemology was aligned for this study, because I sought to understand the context and meanings derived by my participant's previous interactions with school personnel, and with school counselors in particular.

Heppner, Wampold, & Kivlighan (2008) assert that meaning is made out of an individual's experiences with the social and physical environment. The idea of making meaning based on the experiences within a social world is complemented by phenomenology, which is rooted in understanding the essence and meaning one makes out of experiences (Merriam, 2009). Husserl (1970) posited that phenomenology *only* uses data available to human consciousness and the appearance of objects that are unique to the individual. In this study, former foster youth were asked to reflect on their past experiences in K-12 education as a whole. The salient objects (virtue of content or meaning) that are unique to their experience in the context of their social world can emerge through this research process. In phenomenology, one universal truth or absolute

reality does not exist, particularly through a constructionist worldview (Moustakas, 1994). As such, a constructionist approach is a logical epistemology in phenomenological research methods (Heppner et al., 2008). The purpose and focus of this study was not on K-12 schools or educators, but rather, the meaning former foster youth generated through social interactions.

Theoretical Perspective

The foundation of this study is rooted in the assumptions of constructionist epistemology and subjective meaning that is made through interactions with others (Crotty, 1998). The research questions being examined are best viewed through the theoretical lens of post-traumatic growth theory. Constructionism is aligned with post-traumatic growth theory, as this theory is subjectively understood and unique to individuals who have experienced trauma (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). This philosophical stance is the basis for informing the phenomenological methodology used, and provides a context for this study.

Posttraumatic growth theory posits that an individual makes unique meaning of a traumatic event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) assert that trauma is a turning point in the life narrative in which the event changes perspectives in the assumptive world. Consistent with constructionist epistemology, the assumptive world is constructed based on the meaning one creates through engaging in the world around them (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Crotty, 1998). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) “the basic beliefs about oneself, one’s place and function in the world, other people, and the future (p. 296).” This study focused on the changes that occurred as a result of being a student with a history at some point before they completed high school, and is based on

how trauma changed the perspectives in the assumptive world of former foster youth. As in constructionism and phenomenology, post-traumatic growth theory posits that individuals assign their own meaning based on significant life events and experiences (Crotty, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The impact of trauma is not always associated with negative outcomes, and allows for the possibility that one may have experienced life-altering growth despite trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The environment in which the trauma(s) occurred is not as important as how the individual experienced the trauma and how they experienced the world after the trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and in this study, the subsequent impact on education and interactions with school counselors.

This study allowed foster youth to reflect on their previous school environment(s) and relay their own individual experiences through the research process. I sought to understand if youth experienced environments that promoted or hindered posttraumatic growth, and represent through their voices how they interpreted the educational environment and interactions with school counselors when looking back on K-12 education as a whole. Through examining the lived experiences through a constructionist epistemology through the lens of post-traumatic growth theory, I was able to get to the core essence of being a student with a trauma history in an educational setting by examining the past experiences of former foster youth who persisted into postsecondary education (Crotty, 1998).

Phenomenological Methodology

According to Crotty (1998), methodology is introduced in order to answer overarching guiding questions in the research study after epistemological and theoretical

perspectives have been explored. Methodology is seen as the “strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). I selected phenomenological methodology for this study because phenomenology is grounded in constructionism and is an ideal approach to explore participants’ perspectives and lived experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011). Moustakas (1994) explained phenomenology as “seek[ing] meanings from appearances and arrives at essences through intuition and reflection on conscious acts of experience, leading to ideas, concepts, judgments, and understandings” (p. 15). To this end, phenomenology is an appropriate methodology to capture the essence and worldview of former foster youth through examining their past educational experiences. Merriam (2009) asserted that phenomenology is particularly useful in studying affective and intense emotional experience. Given the influence trauma has on emotions, I believe phenomenology was a logical methodology for this study. Additionally, this methodology allowed me, as a researcher, to focus on participant affect in the context of the meaning participants made when reflecting on past trauma.

Phenomenology is rooted in philosophy and several philosophical perspectives are embedded in this philosophy (Creswell & Clark, 2007). Phenomenology does not rely on one objective truth like positivist or post-positivist research methods; rather, it requires the researcher to withhold presuppositions or assumptions in order to understand the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology emphasizes seeking wisdom over scientific empiricism to gain a deeper understanding of human experience. It is the role of the researcher to approach the phenomenon with a fresh perspective instead of imposing ideals into the phenomenon (Merriam, 2009).

Phenomenology relies on the information available to human consciousness in which perceptions are consciously and intentionally directed toward objects (virtue of content or meaning), or experiences (Moustakas, 1994). This study was focused on the experiences of trauma and then explained by methodological framework. Moustakas (1994) posited that a person's experience of an object and the object itself are available to human consciousness. The understanding of the phenomenon is the participant's experience, thoughts, and feelings about the object (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, participants were asked to reflect on the object (trauma) in order to unveil meaning. Participants did not necessarily view trauma as an object, but they assigned meaning to their experience with trauma by relying on information available to their consciousness through reflection and interactions.

Perception is the primarily source of knowledge and cannot be doubted in a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994). All perceptions are valued and add to the growing body of knowledge related to the phenomenon and the researcher must value multiple perspectives throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1994). To address this, I interviewed nine participants in order to fully understand the essence of trauma and followed specific methods rooted in a phenomenological framework. The philosophical basis for these methods are described below.

Husserl (1938) described phenomenological research as *transcendental phenomenology*, which emphasizes applying a phenomenological methodology without preconceived notions of the phenomena. There are a variety of schools of thought to approaching phenomenological research including transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, linguistic, and ethical. I chose to view this study through the lens of

Husserl's (1938) transcendental phenomenology because this approach emphasizes subjectivity and allows for the researcher to capture the essence of experience through accessing data that is available through human consciousness (Husserl & Frege, 1977; Moustakas, 1994). The word, *transcendental*, is applied because "it adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 3). In this study, I asked participants to reflect on their experiences as a student with a trauma history as they persisted through the K-12 educational system and discovered the essence of this phenomenon through the subjective view of each participant through meaningful reflection.

In summary, phenomenological research is based on the assumption that there is an essence to shared experiences. Phenomenological researchers are interested in showing how complex meanings are built out of the direct experiences of their participants (Merriam, 2009). Phenomenology is rooted in constructionism and focuses on "turning from things to their meaning, from *what is* to *the nature of what is*" (Schwandt & Schwandt, 2001, p. 144, emphasis added). Phenomenological methods include: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of meaning and essence (Moustakas, 1994). Each step as it relates to this study will be explained in detail in the methods section.

Methods

Crotty (1998) defined methods as, "the techniques or procedures used to gather and analyze data related to some research question or hypothesis (p.3)." Now that phenomenological methodology has been described, the methods used in this study will be outlined to demonstrate how I gained a better understanding of foster youth's attitudes

and beliefs about their past experience during K-12 education. Embedded in the methods for this study is a pilot process, which was intended to test the feasibility of the study and acceptability of the interview protocol (Merriam, 2009). The description of the pilot is located later in this chapter in the data collection section.

Procedures

Selection of participants and sampling procedures. I initially intended to recruit 15 participants for this for this study. Dukes (1984) indicates phenomenological studies could include sample sizes ranging anywhere from 1-325, but generally include a range from 3 to 10 participants. Participants should be recruited until saturation occurs, in other words, when no new information surfaces in participant interviews (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Riebschleger, et al., 2015). Conducting multiple interviews with participants was not practical for this study given the population I studied. Former foster youth often have barriers to attending in-person interviews due to life circumstances such as varying work schedules or lack of transportation (Clark, 2009). For this reason, I conducted one interview with each participant. Although I started with a target of 15 participants, I reached the point of saturation with nine participants.

A purposeful criterion-based sampling strategy was used to seek participants who are experts on their individual experiences with trauma. Creswell and Clark (2007) described purposeful sampling as the process of selecting participants who are able to contribute to a further understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling requires participants to meet certain selection criteria (Creswell & Clark, 2007). As noted in previous chapters, youth in the foster care system have a common experience—a trauma history (Cummings, 2016; Riebschleger, et al., 2015; Pynoos, et

al., 2011). I selected participants who self-identified as youth who had a history of trauma (see Appendix B for invitation to participate letter). Additionally, I chose to select participants over the age of 18, and not include youth currently in foster care. The rationale for this decision is based on youth over age 18 who completed a high school credential are able to look back fully on their K-12 educational experience and reflect on the most salient parts of their education and journey into postsecondary education.

Following Institutional Review Board approval, I recruited participants through (1) organizations that work directly with youth formerly involved in the foster care system (e.g. non-profit organizations, higher education programs, etc.); (2) higher education voucher programs; (3) foster care scholarship programs; and (4) state organizations working directly with youth in foster care. I offered a Visa Gift Card for \$25 through grant or private funds as an incentive to participate in the interview.

Remler & Van Ryzin (2010) describes purposive sampling, “choosing people who have a unique perspective or occupy important roles” (p. 156). Purposive sampling is used when the researcher believes that individuals who meet certain criteria are able to provide the most rich and relevant data (Merriam, 2009). The criteria that participants must meet are:

1. Youth who experienced an out-of-home placement at any point during their K-12 education in the state of Colorado. An out-of-home placement is defined as a child or youth who was in custody of the county or state at any time during their K-12 education. Placements may occur for one day or across multiple years. Placements could have included (but were not limited to) foster homes, certified kinship homes, residential care treatment facilities, group homes, or youth

correctional facilities (Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G)(ii)).

2. Graduated with an accredited high school diploma or equivalent high school credential (such as GED) in the state of Colorado. This criterion was selected as the youth are among the (approximately) 30% of students who obtain a credential, and are able to speak to the elements of their educational experience that facilitated their graduation with a high school credential.
3. Are attending a postsecondary education program. As previously noted, approximately 20% of former foster youth are enrolled in some form of postsecondary education as defined by the Higher Education Act of 1965. This study is meant to uncover participant youth's experience as being a student with a history of trauma in a K-12 who persisted to complete a high school credential and pursue postsecondary education.
4. Participants have a recent experience in a K-12 education environment in the state of Colorado. In order to accomplish this, I selected participants between the ages of 18-24. This age range allowed for youth who have completed a high school credential by the age of 21, as youth are entitled to receive a K-12 education until the age of 21. Youth aged 24 and under have the possibility of participating in K-12 education within the past three years. I selected to cap the participant age at 24 because the Colorado Statute 22-32-128 was enacted in 2012, which allows for anyone aged 24 or under to have been impacted by the law intended to improve educational outcomes.

Gender and ethnicity diversification. I sought participants who self-identify membership in diverse identity groups. To increase transferability of this study, I sought participants from various identity groups including gender and ethnicity. The participant's demographics will be discussed in Chapter IV.

Setting. In this study, I limited participants to youth who attended school in the state of Colorado during their out-of-home placement. Although there is federal law that contains education provisions for young people in foster care, there are additional state statutes in Colorado that go beyond the minimal provisions in federal law. Isolating this study to one state ensure that participants were governed by the same legal and judicial parameters.

In-person interviewing is an ideal method to collect data for this phenomenological research. Creswell and Clark (2007) recommends in-person interviews to obtain verbal and non-verbal cues from participants. Selecting participants in the same geographical location allowed me as a researcher the opportunity to conduct in-person interviews for eight of the nine participants. I conducted one interview via Skype for a participant who was studying abroad at the time of the interview.

Data Collection

I obtained approval from the University of Northern Colorado's Institutional Review Board to conduct this study. Upon approval for this study, I contacted foster care stakeholders (non-profit organizations, state agencies, etc.) to recruit potential participants (see Appendix A). Initially 15 participants expressed interest in participating in the study via email, and I sent them the invitation to participate letter (see Appendix B). I asked participants to respond to me if they felt they met the criteria for the study and

were interested in participating. When participants responded, I asked them to schedule approximately 60-90 minutes for the interview. Given the confidential nature of the interview, the participants were given the option to choose a neutral location that is comfortable for them to ensure privacy and confidentiality, and I met the participants in a location of their choosing for the interviews.

I reviewed the informed consent form with the participants prior to conducting the interview (see Appendix C). I emailed the documents ahead of time to the participant using Skype, and the participant scanned and returned the document to me via email prior to the interview. The participants agreed to participate in the study by signing the informed consent form, and filled out a brief demographic questionnaire.

Demographic information. I began the interview by asking demographic related questions in order to better understand the participants' experience with the foster care system. I asked their age, gender, ethnicity, length of time spent in the foster care system, age and grade level, and general geographic descriptors of the K-12 school environment (e.g. rural, urban, or suburban) the student was involved in the foster care system. If the youth experienced multiple K-12 settings, I asked them to describe the various settings to the best of their ability (see Appendix D).

Interviews. Merriam (2009) suggests interviewing as the most common form of data collection and is, "necessary when we cannot observe behavior, feelings, or how people interpret the world around them" (p. 72). Interviewing is a particularly appropriate form of data collection in phenomenological research, as it allows for the ability to collect in-depth information directly from participants (Creswell & Clark, 2007). For this study, I used face-to-face interviews, most of which were in-person and one via

electronic video conferencing, in order to gather data about the perceptions former foster youths have as students with a trauma history during educational journey to postsecondary education, interactions with school counselors, and growth despite trauma. Interviews with each participant were approximately 60 minutes in length. I asked a series of open-ended questions intended to elicit the world-views and opinions of participants (See Appendix E).

Moustakas (1994) recognized research procedures as a ways to provide guidance, movement, and integrity. In phenomenological research, the researcher must be able to be rigorous while still being emergent and flexible during the process (Moustakas, 1994). The creation of procedures that guide the study provided a set of steps and guidelines that were followed throughout the study in order to provide credibility and trustworthiness (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). This research study included one individual interview with each of the nine participants in order to gain insight into the experience of being a student with a trauma history in a K-12 educational environment. I had three coders (including myself) and engaged in member checks to build rigor and ensure thorough data analysis (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Richardson, & St. Pierre, 2005). Details about the coders and coding procedures used in this study will be outlined later in this chapter.

Structure of the interview. Phenomenological studies are often conducted by using semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method (Moustakas, 1994). I used Moustakas' general interview guide (1994, p.116) as a frame of reference for this study when developing the interview protocol (located in Appendix E). Kline (2008) asserts that initial interview questions should be mostly open and exploratory,

consistent with the research approach. In phenomenology, the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection, and I used my experience as a counselor and intuition to ask appropriate follow-up questions not in the guide during the interview process. I chose individual interviews over focus groups in this study after considering the value and feasibility related to this study (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Due to the sensitive and individual nature of the experience with trauma, it was most appropriate to conduct an in-person, semi-structured interview.

Pilot of Instrument and Interview Protocol

Merriam (2009) stressed that it is crucial to pilot your instrument and interview questions to gain feedback on the flow, clarity, and understanding of the questions by participants. Piloting can be used to test the feasibility for the proposed study, acceptability of an interview or observation protocols to enhance the credibility of a phenomenological study (Holloway, 1997; Lancaster, Dodd, & Williamson, 2004; Padgett, 2016). Kim (2011) posited pilot studies are of particular importance in phenomenological research in order to account for issues and barriers related to recruiting participants, engaging the use of oneself as a researcher to address epoche prior to the study, and the opportunity to modify interview questions. For these reasons, I chose to pilot the interview protocol refine the instrument I developed and to engage as a researcher prior to this study.

As previously noted, I recruited two participants to pilot this proposed study and used the same recruitment strategies as outlined in the data collection section and appendices. The initial two interviews were conducted, and after the interview was completed, I asked the participants what it was like for them to answer the questions.

Both participants noted they enjoyed the interview process, and felt comfortable recalling their experiences during K-12 education. I asked both participants if they felt as if any of the questions should be changed or altered in the demographic questionnaire or if any of the questions I asked them should be changed. Both participants indicated to me that they did not feel there needed to be any changes to the interview process.

After the interview, I utilized my research journal to reflect on the interview experience and address any relevant details related to epoche. I reviewed the tapes and transcripts of the interviews to assess for any changes that needed to be made to the interview protocol in order to address the research questions in this study. I discussed these reflections with my research advisor and research team. Details about the research team in this study will be presented later in this chapter. Upon reflection through use of my research journal, in consultation with my research team and research advisor, and after utilizing a member check, there were no recommended changes to the semi-structured interview protocol. Since there were not changes to the interview protocol, the two pilot interviews were included in the nine total interviews comprising this dataset.

Participant Incentives

I received a grant from the Colorado Evaluation and Action Lab to fund the \$25 gift cards for participant incentives. Participation was voluntary and participants were informed they are able to stop the interview and remove themselves from the study at any time throughout the process. All participants who scheduled an interview completed an interview and all participants received a \$25 Visa Gift Card for their time at the interview. The participant who used Skype received their gift card electronically.

Data Handling Procedures

Interviews were conducted using a digital audio recorder. The files containing the interviews were uploaded onto a hard drive to a password-protected computer and all consent forms will remain within the locked office of the faculty advisor for seven years per university protocol. Interviews were transcribed verbatim in written form after the conclusion of each interview. Any identifiers in the interview (including, but not limited to, name, postsecondary institution, city of residence, etc.) were removed to ensure participant identities are kept anonymous. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to ensure their names were not identifiable. The digital audio recordings were deleted and removed from the hard drive after they were transcribed.

Participants were adults between the ages of 18-24, and participation in this study was voluntary. I realized the topic of past trauma and experiences in the school could have been distressing to participants. To address any risk of possible discomfort participants may experience, I provided as much detailed information as possible in the informed consent to allow participants to make a fully informed decision as to whether or not they were willing to participate. In the informed consent, I explained the procedures and the possibility that talking about past traumatic experiences may invoke strong emotions. Although these experiences are relatively recent, the youth are not currently experiencing the foster care system and were free to terminate their participation in the study at any time.

My experience as a school counselor and vast counselor training in my doctoral program allowed me to recognize possible distress in participants, and I was sensitive to their needs (e.g. offering to slow down or take time when a participant appeared to

become emotional about a topic). Two participants displayed emotional responses during their interviews, and I attended to these emotions through asking if they were comfortable continuing the interview and asked if they needed a break. The participants indicated they felt comfortable continuing the interview, although it was difficult at times to recall their past trauma. As in counseling, qualitative research has the potential to be a cathartic experience, which allows for the possibility that participants may have a positive experience in the research process (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994). To further ensure participant wellness, all participants were provided with a list of resources available at their postsecondary institutions and local communities to get support if the topic of this research study elicited an emotional response (See Appendix F for a sample). Once the interview was scheduled, I used the sample resource list (see Appendix F) as a template and intend to compile a list of resources that are relevant to the geographical location and postsecondary institution of the participant.

As previously mentioned, participants were asked to provide a pseudonym to identify individual participants. Additionally, the specific name of the postsecondary institution or community in which the institution is located is not identified in this study or in any publication or presentation. For example, I described the State, general geographic location, and type of institution where the data was collected (e.g. “a community college in a rural setting in Colorado”).

Qualitative data analysis technology. I used NVivo, which is a qualitative data analysis software created by QSR International to assist with data analysis in this study. NVivo has the capacity to store transcripts of the interviews and researcher journals. The NVivo program and project file was kept on my personal computer that is password

protected. Any potentially identifying information was removed prior to uploading documents to the NVivo file (e.g. pseudonyms were used, and all potentially identifiable geographic locations) were removed prior to the upload on my personal computer. The purpose of using NVivo was to assist in managing and coding the data.

Data Analysis

Role of Research Team

Richardson and St. Pierre (2005) suggest the use of multiple coders in order to reduce bias or subjectivity on the data analysis process. For this study, I utilized a research team in this study to represent diverse perspectives of the view of how youth with a trauma history are viewed in education. I selected two members for the research team who did not have a connection with, or prior understanding of the study for the data analysis of this study. In addition to myself, two other people comprised the research team that analyzed the data. The first member of the team selected for this study has a Ph.D. in Psychology, and has prior experience and training in qualitative coding. The first team member does not have extensive knowledge or professional experience in the foster care system. The second member of the research team is a second-year student a Counselor Education and Supervision and is an experienced school counselor. The second team member also has a private counseling practice and has some clients who are currently in the foster care system. The role of the research team engaged in the steps of phenomenology in the data analysis portion of this study.

Steps of Phenomenology

In order to discover the essence of former foster youth's experiences in reaching postsecondary education, experiences with school counselors and growth despite trauma,

I, along with my research team, utilized the following methods: epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of meaning and essence (Moustakas, 1994). Each of the following steps occur in order, as the steps are intended to build on one another and one cannot happen before the previous step is achieved (Moustakas, 1994). For example, unless epoche is addressed, phenomenological reduction cannot occur. I will explain each of these steps as they relate to this study, and how each are related to the trustworthiness in this study.

Epoche. Moustakas (1994) asserts, “epoche is a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things. (p. 9)” Epoche requires a researcher to suspend judgment of their own perceptions and biases in order to fully see the individual perspective of participants. It is seen as a necessary first step in transcendental phenomenological research. Heppner et al. (2008) encouraged researchers to refrain from holding dogmatic views of the phenomenon being studied. To address epoche, I will discuss my biases, understandings, and judgments that will be set aside for this study later in this chapter.

Phenomenological reduction. Once epoche is addressed, the researcher must be able to take a holistic perspective by viewing phenomena from every side until the essence of it is discovered (Moustakas, 1994). This happens through leading back to the source of the meaning of the experienced world, and viewing participants experiences in and fresh and open way (Moustakas, 1994). There are several steps associated with phenomenological reduction that are relevant in this proposed study: focusing exclusively on the topic at hand, horizontalization, removing repetitive statements, and combining

salient statements and themes into a, “coherent textural description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

I intentionally focused on the topic at hand: the experiences of former foster youth who have a history of trauma in reaching postsecondary education, interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma. I achieved phenomenological reduction through journaling after each interview, listening to the recorded interviews multiple times, and carefully reviewing transcripts to ensure my interpretations are focused on the participant’s experiences with trauma from a holistic perspective. I achieved an understanding of the complexity of the participants’ experiences, which included physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of trauma. Additionally, I continued to recruit participants and conduct interviews until patterns surface and no new themes emerge, and I reached a point of saturation. I did not require my research team to keep a research journal and they were not provided with the audio files of the interviews; however, each member of the team discussed their process of reviewing the written transcripts and their process for understanding the complexity of the participant’s experiences. As noted previously, I consulted with my research advisor and research team about the interviews and discussed reaching the point of saturation in this study.

Horizontalization. Moustakas (1994) described the second step in phenomenological reduction as “horizontalization”, which refers to giving all participant statements equal importance during the research process. This step also involves the researcher putting aside bias or opinion to truly give equal importance to all statements made by participants. To accomplish this, the research team was provided with written

transcripts of the interviews. Each member of the research team coded the transcripts independently and noted themes that emerged from the data. The research team met to review the codes together and developed a code book based on the review of individual statements. More information about coding will be provided later in this chapter.

Imaginative variation. Husserl and Frege (1977) asserted that the function of imaginative variation is to arrive at a, “structural differentiation among the infinite multiplicities of action and possible cognitions, that relate to the object in question and thus can somehow go together to make up the unity of an identifying synthesis” (p.63). The research team used the imaginative variation process to form a structural description of the essence of trauma based on the experiences of the participants in order to address the “how” of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), “we imagine possible structures of time, space, materiality, causality, and relationship to self and of others” (1994, p. 99).

In this study, the research team reflected individually on the emerging themes and considered possible underlying causes or influences that may have impacted their experiences with being a student with a trauma history in an educational setting. The team discussed their individual processes and potential bias in the imaginative variation process. After discussion with my research team, reviewing my researcher journal, and participant transcripts, I selected salient participant statements from transcripts in order to integrate the textural essence of trauma.

Synthesis of meaning and meanings of essences. The final step in phenomenological reduction is Synthesis of Meanings and Essences (Moustakas, 1994). This step is meant to synthesize textural descriptions to portray the meaning and essences

of the particular phenomena. A phenomenological study is meant to provide a rich and thick description that captures the essence of the phenomenon, which allows the reader to understand the lived experience of the participants (Merriam, 2009). All of the steps require reflexivity from the researcher and an ability to, “attend, recognize and describe with clarity” (Moustakas, 1994, p.93) A coherent description of the experience of being a youth who has experienced foster care and persisted despite their trauma will be presented in Chapter IV, and in alignment with the steps in phenomenological reduction, I will include contextual, structural and textual elements, which accurately represent the experiences of the participants.

Initial coding. After the research team reviewed all interview transcripts and my researcher journal, we assigned initial codes into overarching themes (Moustakas, 1994). We assigned codes based on our initial impressions of the data after completing horizontalization and the data reduction process. In order to develop initial codes, we used a phenomenological data analysis procedure in which each statement was grouped under a thematic label or meaning unit (Creswell & Clark, 2007). This process assisted in developing themes related to the core phenomenon under study.

Developing broad themes. Creswell and Clark (2007) recommended researchers use as few themes as possible to describe the findings. After the initial codes were developed, the research team looked for broader themes in order to succinctly describe the findings. We analyzed the codes that were similar to a smaller number of broad themes. After developing broader themes, we analyzed all transcripts again by using the broad themes. In order to reduce bias, we looked through the transcripts again to identify data that do not fit into broad themes.

Final identification of themes. After initial data is coded and assigned to broader themes, Moustakas (1994) recommends a process called verifying themes final identification. In final identification, each significant statement and corresponding theme is checked against participant's individual transcripts. Moustakas (1994) recommends a specific process for checking statements with themes:

1. Are they expressed explicitly in the complete transcription?
2. Are they compatible if not explicitly expressed?
3. If they are not explicit or compatible, they are not relevant to the

[participant's] experiences and should be deleted. (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121)

The research team followed this process in the final identification stage of data analysis to ensure the data is accurately supported through the themes. We met as a team to come to consensus on the final identification of primary and secondary themes which described the essence of the participant's experiences in K-12 education as a traumatized student.

Textural descriptions. The final stage in phenomenological reduction is synthesis of meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994). In this final step, the research team constructed structural descriptions that describe how the experience occurred (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The structural descriptions included contextual and environmental factors that were influential in the experience of the phenomenon. These are presented through use of direct participant quotes and my own reflection in Chapter IV (Moustakas, 1994). The research team developed a code book to describe the primary and secondary themes to describe the synthesis of meanings and essences in this study. The research team's code book is located in Appendix H.

Researcher Stance

“In phenomenological investigation, the researcher has a personal interest in whatever she or he seeks to know; the researcher is intimately connected with the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 15). The researcher’s stance should be made explicit at the forefront of the study to inform readers how the researcher may impact the co-construction of meaning in the study (Lietz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). Furthermore, the understanding of the researcher’s stance adds to the trustworthiness in the study (Merriam, 2009). My personal interest and connection in this research is rooted in my previous research conducted with former foster care youth, previous interactions with traumatized youth as a supervisor-in-training and a school counselor, and State Coordinator for Foster Care Education in Colorado. For the past 15 years in professional education of some capacity, makes me deeply connected to vulnerable youth and ignites a drive to fully understand trauma from the youth perspective.

Past Research

My experience as a researcher framed my interpretation of the foster care and trauma literature. In 2014, I was a part of a research team that explored the educational attainment gaps from the perspective of youth formerly involved in the foster care system. There were several major themes that emerged from this study that informed this study; the emotional consequences of trauma, resilience, and internalized messages about education. This study also revealed an apparent dichotomy between poor educational outcomes, and educational success. Recommendations for future research included gaining a further understanding about the intellectual, behavioral, and emotional

consequences of traumatized youth (Cole & Eamon, 2007; Clemens et al., 2017; Widom, 2013).

Although my participation on this team allowed me to develop an identity as a researcher, I realize this research experience on a similar topic (foster care) could have potentially influenced my interpretation in this study. More detail on this will be covered in the assumptions section.

Professional and Educational Experiences

My experiences as a supervisor and educator-in-training provide a part of the context of this study. As a supervisor-in-training, I encountered supervisees that needed additional support in working with traumatized children in schools. Several supervisees desired additional knowledge beyond the trauma class during practicum and internship experiences. As a supervisor-in-training, I realized the value and need to have a solid grasp on this topic myself in order to provide quality supervision and guidance. In order to provide this guidance, I expanded my knowledge through reviewing literature, consultation with my peers, and additional coursework in trauma. I also reflected on my own work as a school counselor when providing counseling and guidance to traumatized students.

As previously noted, I worked in K-12 education primarily as a school counselor for the past 15 years. During this time, I worked with a substantial number of youth in foster care or at-risk of experiencing the foster care system due to child maltreatment and neglect. During this time, I encountered an educational system that was at times helpful, and other times a hindrance, to traumatized young people. My professional experience providing direct services to students is a frame of reference for me in my own attitudes

and beliefs as a school counselor. I recognize the participants in this study may have school counselors with varying degrees of experience in working with traumatized individuals.

Finally, as the State Coordinator for Foster Care Education in Colorado, I am in the position to work on behalf of children and youth in foster care on a daily basis. My role is to fully understand the potential barriers to education for young people in foster care as well as the environments that foster success. I have a comprehensive understanding of the educational systems in Colorado, and interact with other State coordinators on a national level regarding the education for children and youth in the foster care system. I work directly with the systems that are charged with supporting children through the trauma that led them to be removed from the home, the removal itself, and the consequences these experiences have on education.

Assumptions

The concept of epoche was introduced earlier in this chapter, which requires the researcher to set aside judgments, partiality, and assumptions about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In this section, I will acknowledge my assumptions going into this study in order to take a fresh look at the phenomenon. This process assisted me in outlining potential assumptions and biases prior to conducting research, and I continued the epoche process throughout the study through journaling, use of a research team, and developed awareness of my potential bias of the data. I briefly discussed my assumptions and biases here and in chapter I. I also addressed any biases during the research process through keeping a researcher journal and utilized my research team for bracketing while conducting this study.

As noted in the previous section, I was a part of a research team that studied former foster youth in education. Although this study is useful and meaningful in terms of educational outcomes, the focus was not on the participant's experience with trauma specifically in a K-12 setting. The results indicated there were emotional consequences in education; however, trauma or trauma-informed educators were not a central theme in the study. I bracketed the previous findings and my experience as a researcher, and focused solely on this particular study. I cannot ignore this research experience, or my knowledge of the literature on this topic, but intentionally recognized the possibility for influence throughout this research process.

My past experience as a school counselor could have had an influence my interpretations of the research. I realize the participants in this study had varying experiences with their school counselors, and could be perceived as negative or positive for a variety of reasons. Participants also have their own individual experiences of being a student with a history of trauma in a school setting. My ideas or preconceived notions of what is helpful or not helpful in working with traumatized individuals were not relevant participant's unique experiences.

My experience as the State Coordinator for Foster Care Education is useful in understanding the systems my participants were involved in during their time in foster care; however, I realize my general understanding of these systems may not be my participant's actual experience. Some of the participants in this study did not experience a great deal of educational instability, and some were impacted by the educational rights afforded to them under current federal and state laws such as fee waivers to participate in extracurricular activities. I intentionally bracketed my bias of the systems the youth

experienced in order to fully understand the essence of what it was like for them to be a traumatized student.

I had several key assumptions in this study in addition to my educational and professional experience in working with youth in foster care. First, I assumed that youth who beat the odds to obtain a high school credential and went on to some form of postsecondary education had at least one person that was supportive during their time in K-12 education. Secondly, my knowledge of trauma-informed literature would indicate the person(s) in the supportive role exhibited one or more of attributes of a trauma-informed approach. While these assumptions were reflected to some extent in the participant's interviews, these assumptions were bracketed and noted in my researcher journal.

Biases

An important bias to note going into this study is my bias toward my belief in a trauma-informed approach. I believe that approaching all students with a trauma-informed lens increases the likelihood that student will be successful emotionally and academically in school. I believe a trauma-informed approach to education creates the conditions necessary to form healthy relationships between students and educators, particularly for school counselors. As a person-centered school counselor, I believe that empathy and relationship building are essential components in the counselor/student relationship.

I shared my educational and professional past, assumptions, and biases in order to be explicit and transparent entering into this study. I reflected on my assumptions and biases throughout this process in hopes of studying trauma with a fresh perspective. In

order for this to occur, I maintained emerging biases and assumptions in my researcher journal. These processes, along with the other trustworthiness measures outlined in the next section will hopefully allow me to portray my participant's experiences accurately.

The two members of the research team provided their biases regarding children and youth in foster care who have experienced trauma and school counselors at the forefront of the study. These biases were discussed throughout the coding process as relevant. The first member of the research team indicated that she never had the opportunity to work directly with students in foster care, but she was excited to learn more through this project. Before this project, she was not aware of the challenges these students faced before and after placement. Her knowledge was restricted to what was discussed at work (e.g. graduation rate, dropout rate). Due to work in her current role, she was aware of how many schools struggle to provide services and supports to students in foster care. Due to her own experiences with childhood trauma, this member of the research team related to many of the students interviewed and understood the role as it related to adverse childhood experiences. Her main assumption going into this project was that foster care students rarely succeed academically and do not typically go on to postsecondary education programs.

The second reviewer is a Licensed Professional Counselor who has worked with over 35 youth in the foster care system and their families and foster families. She also holds a Special Services Provider license and worked for ten years as a Professional School Counselor. She has experienced the difficulties of managing a large caseload as a school counselor as well as the demands of various stakeholders which compete for resources and can compromise direct student support. She has also witnessed many

injustices of the foster care system and advocated on behalf of her clients against these injustices. Additionally, she has navigated the scarcity of adequate communication and collaboration that often exists with complex and challenging life situations. This reviewer has also engaged in specialized training in trauma-informed practice and interventions, and she believes best practice for schools is to be trauma responsive. Finally, this reviewer holds the bias that the foster care system, while working to keep kids safe, also unintentionally (or at times intentionally) creates barriers to recovery and emotional healing which gravely impacts their personal, academic, and career paths.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln & Guba (1985) describe trustworthiness as the measure of rigor in qualitative research. As with any approach to research, reliability and validity are important, and although the terms are the same, the approaches differ between qualitative and quantitative research. Merriam (2009) clarified this point by stating, “One of the assumptions underlying in qualitative research is that reality is holistic, multidimensional, and ever-changing; it is not a single, fixed, objective phenomenon waiting to be discovered, observed, and measured as in quantitative research” (p.202). Schwandt and Schwandt (2001) proposes five criteria of trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity. These measures of trustworthiness as they related to this proposed study are outlined below.

Credibility

In phenomenology, credibility is a key aspect in the data analysis process. In this phenomenological study, I established credibility by going to the source of the information: the individual participant. I addressed credibility in this study by: researcher

reflexivity, one external auditor, and member checks (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Merriam, 2009). Each of these elements of credibility are outlined below.

Researcher reflexivity. Researcher reflexivity is essential to reduce the risk of compromising the research due to the researcher's assumptions and biases. This aspect of credibility is integral in phenomenological design (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). To address this concern, it is essential for the researcher to identify potential assumptions or biases that may interfere with the research by bracketing information in order to allow the experience of the participants to emerge in the research (Lietz et al., 2006).

Many steps were taken to promote researcher reflexivity, as outlined fully in Chapter III. Briefly, I wrote researcher journals after every interview with participants to reflect and process my reactions to the interview. I listened to the recordings of each participant multiple times and referenced my researcher journal, noting initial themes that emerged from the data. As described in earlier in this chapter, a research team reviewed my researcher journal and data to assess for any biases I had during the data collection and data analysis stages of this study. Finally, I selected an external coder to perform an extensive audit of the data analysis portion of the study to ensure trustworthiness of the results.

Consensual qualitative research. Consensual Qualitative Research methods were used in the data analysis of this study. Consensual Qualitative Research was developed by counseling psychologists in order to integrate the descriptive depth and richness of constructivist qualitative methods with postpositivist reliance on coming to consensus on data analysis (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997). While a strict

Consensual Qualitative Research methodology was not used in this study, some of the methods were used to further trustworthiness and transferability of the data. Specifically, the coding team used the process of interpreting the data independently and coming to consensus as a coding team.

Member checks. Member checking is a procedure used to increase credibility in a study by seeking feedback from the participants on the finding and interpretations (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Merriam, 2009). At the beginning of each interview, I offered each participant a variety of options to receive their individual data (e.g. by email, personal delivery, mail delivery). All participants asked to receive their transcripts via email. After my initial codes were assigned, I contacted participants through the email address provided through the recruitment process (listed in Appendix B). In this email request, I asked participants to review a transcript of their individual interview and review an overview of themes that emerged from the interview. I asked participants to verify the fit of the themes to ensure I am representing what they intended to convey in the interview accurately. In addition to the transcripts and themes, I sent each participant the participant overview of how I interpreted their interview and supporting quotes to check for accuracy. Each participant received an interview overview, which is provided in Chapter IV. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to add or delete any information from the transcripts. One participant asked to change their pseudonym and asked me to remove the word “like” from her quotes, as she felt it distracted from the meaning of her quotes. Participants also received overview of the results and the code book developed by the coding team at the conclusion of data analysis.

External auditor. The use of an external auditor in this study was intended to provide an extensive audit of the data analysis portion of the study to ensure trustworthiness of the results. Creswell and Clark (2007) suggests the use of an external auditor to check the accuracy of the findings can enhance credibility. An external auditor also used to assess for any impact the researcher's biases may have on the interview process and data analysis (Creswell & Clark, 2007).

The use of an external auditor was used after the coding team identified the final themes. The external auditor I selected has a Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision and does not have extensive knowledge of the foster care system or foster care related literature. The external auditor was provided with the code book developed by the coding team, the written transcripts of the interviews, and the final codes assigned by the coding team. The external auditor reviewed the data and did not note any bias in the data and did not disagree with any of the themes or secondary theme assigned to each statement.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which the results of a study can be applied to other contexts (Mertens, 1998). The quality of transferability depends on the researcher's ability to describe the research process and findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In phenomenological research, the researcher describes the data through the use of rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 2009). This description includes details about the participants, the setting, and the findings. Direct quotes from participants that support the findings allow the reader to fully understand the context and specific aspects of the

phenomenon. I addressed transferability through providing a rich and thick description of participants' experiences of being a student with a trauma history in a K-12 setting.

Dependability

The fourth aspect of rigor that was addressed in this study is dependability. Lincoln & Guba (1985) note the concept of dependability is often compared with the term reliability in quantitative research. In quantitative research, reliability is measured by the whether or not the results reflect true scores (Heppner et al., 2008), and the extent to which those results would hold in future studies. In qualitative research, dependability is viewed as whether the data collected would be stable over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Merriam (2009) encourages researchers to use researcher reflexivity and an audit trail to ensure dependability. Researcher reflexivity was previously described in this chapter. In order to address the audit trail, I documented decisions I make throughout this study. This document contains decisions I made about research design, data collection, and data analysis.

Confirmability

Schwandt and Schwandt (2001) describes confirmability as being, "concerned with establishing the fact that the data and interpretations of an inquiry were not merely figments of the inquirer's imagination" (p. 299). In this study, I ensured the findings and interpretations can be confirmed by data by directly linking findings to raw data (Schwandt & Schwandt, 2001). As previously noted, the use of external audits, audit trails, and member checking were used to increase confirmability. These self-reflective and external perspectives of data were intended to increase dependability and conformability of the findings in this study.

Authenticity

Authenticity is seen as the ability to represent multiple perspectives in data interpretation (Mertens, 1998). Fairness includes introducing differing perspectives and values to the findings (Mertens, 1998). Authenticity and fairness fit with the constructionist epistemology in this study in that differing perspectives and underlying values are from the lived experience of participants along with their social contexts, and are valued in the findings of this study. I checked for accuracy of results through the use of an external auditor in order to provide an extensive audit of the data, which includes reviewing my researcher journal, transcripts, and initial codes and themes. I also addressed authenticity through the use of member checks, which included having participants review codes and themes to ensure my interpretation reflects their experiences. Having these multiple perspectives account for authenticity of the data through accessing multiple perspectives of data analysis.

Conclusion

In this chapter I explained the appropriateness of the chosen research epistemology, theoretical perspective, methodology, and methods (Crotty, 1998). Additionally, I explained the steps of phenomenology, which are epoche, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and synthesis of meanings and essences, and discussed how the research team approached these steps philosophically and procedurally. I also addressed specific procedures that were used in conducting this study including selection of participants, sampling procedures, data collection, data handling procedures, and data analysis. I addressed my researcher stance, assumptions,

and biases going into this study. Finally, I addressed how I addressed trustworthiness and rigor in this study.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce readers to the study participants, presenting their demographics and each participant's described experience of being a student with a trauma history in their journey to postsecondary education. Next, I will present my general reactions to the study and my reactions to each individual participant. Finally, I will present the results of the study through a detailed description of the themes that emerged from the data, including a description and supporting quotes for each primary theme and secondary theme.

Participant Demographics

Nine youth formerly in the foster care system participated in the study. All nine participants filled out a demographic questionnaire and completed a verbal interview. Eight participants were interviewed face-to-face, and one participant was interviewed through video conferencing using Skype.

Each participant filled out a demographic questionnaire consisting of questions designed to get an accurate description of time they spent in foster care, number of schools attended, ethnicity, and age. Six participants spent between two and six years in foster care and three participants spent between seven and eleven years in foster care. Participant's grade levels during placement ranged from kindergarten through high school, and eight participants were in placement at some point in high school. The schools were generally in suburban settings except for two participants one of which

attended school and one attended a school in an urban and in a rural setting. Four participants attended between two and four schools during their time in foster care. Four participants attended between five and eight schools and one participant reported attending 14 different schools. The current ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 24, with a mean age of 20. Ethnicities represented included: Hispanic (n=1), mixed race (n=1), Caucasian and Korean (n=1), Caucasian, (n=4), African American (n=1), and Mexican (n=1).

Participant Descriptions

This section provides context to the experiences of the participants through a brief description of each participant as an individual prior to introducing the results of this study. Each participant had unique experiences and perceptions as a former foster youth with a trauma history during their educational journey to postsecondary education, interactions with school counselors, and growth despite trauma. This section is intended to introduce readers to the participants in order to understand how the individual is represented in relation to the results. A general overview of the participant, and a supporting quote that speaks to their experiences is provided for each participant.

“Izzy”

Izzy is 20 years old and is currently a junior at a large university in Colorado. She entered foster care at the end of eighth grade due to abuse in her home. She graduated from high school with a diploma with honors. After entering foster care, she experienced mobility in foster placements, school placements, and experiences in residential treatment facilities for depression. She identified as always feeling motivated and driven in school, and academics have been an important value for her as long as she can remember.

Izzy experienced a prolonged experience with depression and multiple suicide attempts that she attributed to her home environment before being placed in foster care. She described experiences where she was betrayed by adults in her life and feeling powerless when people did not believe her about circumstances prior to and post foster care placement. While Izzy described her strength and resiliency after making it through so much adversity in her life, she indicated she would not change her experience if she had the choice.

I don't know where I got it [internal strength] from. I don't know how it's lasting. And that's kinda one of the things that's hard 'cause, you know, like you said there's so few people that have it that have been just through all of this stuff and can still keep going. It's not a bad thing because if they've made it, you know, they don't have to graduate or whatever, you're alive, you made it, like that's incredible. I wish I knew the formula for how to survive foster care 'cause there's a lot more people that are gonna go through it, and I wish I could help them and teach them my ways, but I don't know what my ways are.

“Zach”

Zach is a senior at a large university in Colorado. He officially entered foster care in fourth grade, but had a prior out-of-home placement before a county child welfare agency took him into custody. He experienced school mobility prior to being placed in foster care and changed schools again after entering foster care. Zach found out he was being placed in foster care while he was at school due to police-related activity at his home. He was placed with family members, who ultimately adopted him.

He attributed his success in school to a balance of internal motivation and supportive school personnel, positive interactions with child welfare personnel and the child welfare system, and supportive family members. He indicated that being placed with family, rather than a foster home, made a difference for him educationally and

emotionally. Zach described being motivated to succeed in school because he wanted a different life than his biological parents had.

Once I got settled in and I kind of accepted the fact that I'm not gonna live with my parents ever again, this is sort of the spot, I made it a deal that I'm not gonna go back. I wanna be somewhere successful. I want to just live a comfortable life, and so I just pushed myself education-wise. Since at the time, I wasn't super gifted, athletically, at least I could work hard, and I could be bright, hopefully. That was the goal.

“Precious”

Precious is 22 years old and currently enrolled, but taking a brief hiatus from a postsecondary certificate program. Precious intends to finish the program once her life becomes stable again. Precious became pregnant during her first year of the postsecondary certificate program. Soon after she found out about her pregnancy, she lost her housing voucher due to an issue with her landlord and became homeless. Precious continued school during the period of homelessness, but decided to take a break from school in order to prioritize caring for herself and her daughter. Despite her trauma and circumstances, Precious is driven to return to school and finish her degree.

Precious was initially placed in foster care as a young child and experienced high mobility in her home and in school placements until she was adopted at age eight. She was placed back into the foster care system by her adoptive parents at age 14 and remained in care until 18. Her biological mother passed away near the time she was put back into foster care, which Precious describes as another layer of trauma on an already traumatic situation. Precious described her experiences within the foster homes as generally positive. Many of her foster parents supported her with homework and were emotionally supportive. Precious' experience with home and school mobility had a profound impact on her emotionally and socially. The meaning of instability impacted

Precious in multiple aspects of her life. Precious identified as someone who always loved learning and indicated that academics came easy to her. Precious described how her experiences with foster care made her stronger, and made her into the person she is today.

I just feel like it changed me to be humble and to really be passionate about what I go after, going through all of it, because there's a lot of people who are like "Oh, I went through foster care. I went through this and that" and they give up, but I don't know, it just made me stronger, and it made me want more. I feel like it just gave me more drive...And trauma shouldn't stop me. Sometimes it's distracting if you're having a bad day or you feel like you don't necessarily have all the support behind you, but I didn't let it stop me. It's not the easiest thing to go through, but me and my daughter won't be a statistic. I'll make sure of it.

“Tristan”

Tristan is 18 and is attending school at a community college with plans to transfer to a large university. Tristan entered foster care on three separate occasions and was taken into child welfare custody permanently in high school. Tristan experienced school mobility prior to being placed in foster care. He described his home life outside of foster care as “toxic” and frequently witnessed substance abuse and physical altercations in his home. He indicated that he did not attend school regularly and found an outlet for his home environment in playing video games.

Tristan struggled with school due to the emotional impact his home life prior to his permanent placement in foster care. A turning point for Tristan was being placed with a friend’s family after being removed from his home permanently. He described the family as modeling different priorities than he grew up with and the people and environment he was in motivated him. Tristan began working at school and bringing his grade point average from a .001 to a 3.0 and earning a 4.0 in his senior year. In addition to his foster placement, Tristan also attributed his success in school to the team of people surrounding him in the child welfare system. He described the internal motivation and

drive he found within himself to succeed. He also viewed his trauma and challenges in his childhood as attributes that made him stronger.

I'm just – I'm really strong-minded, and I've – I have a lot of resiliency due to so much adaptation, and moving, and stuff like that. And then I have a really strong mind. Whenever I moved into my friend's house, his mindset was really strong, and he – I developed that. And I feel like – I don't know – impenetrable, kind of... I personally took out the good from it. I personally took out the strengths throughout seeing the trauma and stuff rather than resorting to other coping skills, like drugs and stuff... I saw that I gained resiliency... There's plenty of good that I took from my childhood. There's plenty of good that I took from every one of my experiences.

“Vanessa”

Vanessa is 19 and currently enrolled in a postsecondary certificate program at a community college after earning her GED. She was born in another country and came to the United States when she was adopted in first grade. She lived with her adoptive parents until she entered foster care at age 14. Vanessa started school in a traditional elementary school where she learned to speak English. She began homeschooling during early elementary school and described three years of abuse in her home during that time. Vanessa experienced home and school instability prior to and after being placed in foster care, which resulted in academic consequences. She experienced a variety of school settings and academic experiences, including education through residential treatment facilities.

Vanessa had limited experiences in a traditional K12 education setting. She attended two different traditional high schools non-consecutively in different cities. She described the emotional impact of not having the chance to have a traditional high school experience due to being in foster care, being singled out for having an individualized education plan, and experiencing mobility. Vanessa's attributed her experiences with

education in treatment facilities as a barrier to earning a high school diploma due to the lack of transferring credits. Vanessa also struggled with making friends and having social connections with peers due to her placement and school mobility. The emotional social impact of the residential placements was a prevalent theme for Vanessa during her journey to postsecondary education.

And it's just like, how do you expect me to have any trust in my environment, where I'm supposed to be, if the second I take a deep breath, I'm just moved? It's kinda hard to reintroduce yourself. It's hard to re-make friends. You just kinda, like, go into the mindset like, "Okay, I'm gonna be here for a couple months and then I'm gonna move," so you don't even try to make friends or you don't even try to socialize with the teachers or participate. You're just getting by. You're just, like, dealing with it, I guess is how it felt for me, anyways... For me it impacts the fact, like I said, I couldn't socialize normally. I just never learned those social skills. Minus the whole treatment part. I was just so antisocial. I feel like I wouldn't have been like that if I had the chance to be a kid, you know?

“Desiree”

Desiree is 20 years old and a freshman at a large university in Colorado. She entered foster care at age 3. She was adopted when she was 13. Desiree had a difficult time academically due school personnel, therapists arranged through the child welfare system, and child welfare professionals. Desiree described always struggling with learning due to an undiagnosed disability that was not identified until college. She describes being judged and misunderstood by school and child welfare personnel.

Desiree attributes her academic success despite the barriers she encountered in the school environment to her support system in her adoptive home, her internal drive for success, and looking up to her extended family as role models. Although it took her some time to get acclimated to her new family, her mother was a source of strength for her. Despite all of the trauma and difficulties Desiree faced in school, she indicated that she would not change her life if she had the choice.

I wouldn't change it for anything. Like this is just what's going to take me where I need to go and I have to go through this and it's going to pay off." Like it can't be for nothing. That's what I keep on telling myself because I just – like it can't be for nothing and that's why I have tried for school because it's like I've come this far, like I can't give up. Like I can't. And even though I really want to.

“Jim”

Jim is 24 years old and graduated from a large university in Colorado. Jim entered the foster care system in high school when she advocated for herself in the child welfare system to get removed from her home. Her mother battled an opioid addiction that ultimately took her life after Jim was put in foster care. Jim grew up at a young age due to living with her mother's addiction. She described the confusing experience of growing up in an environment that was full of love and unhealthy at the same time.

In addition to advocating for herself in the child welfare system, Jim also described reaching out for help in school. Jim's stressful life at home started impacting her in the school environment. She had a strong desire to finish high school, but the traditional school environment was not a safe place and was not a viable option for her. Jim indicated her school counselor was an advocate for her and helped her finish high school through allowing her to have a reduced schedule in the school building. Although Jim experienced a multitude of traumatic experiences before foster care, Jim made meaning from her trauma and indicated she was stronger as a result of her trauma and despite the challenges and painful circumstances.

I think that there are a lot of things that I wish I didn't have to face. I mean I wish my mom didn't have a drug addiction that ended up taking her life. At the same time, I have worked really hard and I've overcome a lot. I really like who I am and where I am and how I got here. Had I not had to face a lot of the things that I faced and find out what it's like to be independent at a really young age, I wouldn't be at this place in my life. I'm proud of who I am. It took me a really long time to be -- to be confident and to be comfortable in my own skin. I know

that a lot of that was because I was living with a lot of trauma and I was carrying a lot of weight and responsibility. I mean it made me stronger and it made me have a very clear understanding of what privilege is and has helped me to be really grateful and giving.

“Coby”

Coby is 20 years old and a senior at a large university in Colorado. Coby received a full-ride scholarship to attend college. He was initially placed into the foster system at a young age. Coby was called down to the office, assuming he was in trouble, but instead he was informed that he had to go with a caseworker and was being taken from his home. He experienced multiple foster placements and schools during his time in foster care, including a residential treatment facility.

Coby described developing increasingly strong peer connections throughout the years. He indicated that he had a relatively easy time making friends at each school placement and found a sense of normalcy by participating in extracurricular activities. In college, Coby still finds support with his foster family and visits them occasionally on breaks, but his closest connections are with his group of friends. Coby described a sense of freedom upon emancipating from the foster care system and entering college. He described a sense of relief in letting his past go and starting a new future that he could control.

I left it all behind me. I was like, “There’s nothing” – after I emancipated, I was like, “There is nothing that’s stopping me now. I’m just like every one of you guys.” And I feel like sometimes I’m a little better off, just ‘cause my – how much I’ve relied on networking and connections, and I’m just really great at it now. So people that would rely heavily on their family to vent to and stuff, well now the family they have to call them or they can’t have a shoulder to lean on. But me, I just call up a friend up here or go to my – go out into my living room and talk to them. So I don’t really think that my trauma or stress I felt in high school has followed me. I feel like it’s something I left.

“Allie”

Allie is 18 years old and a freshman at a large university in Colorado. She entered the foster care system at the end of her sophomore year in high school. Prior to entering foster care, her dad passed away and she lived with her mother who she describes as having a mental illness. Allie experienced 14 different schools during her K12 education, which she attributes to her mother’s mental illness. Allie was put into the position of being a caretaker for her mother and missed school frequently to stay home and take care of her mother. She experienced food instability and frequent home and school moves. Although Allie experienced a variety of educational settings, she indicated that it was relatively easy for her to make friends and connect with teachers.

Allie indicated she had a strong team of peers, school personnel, and child welfare personnel behind her which assisted her in staying motivated and focused on succeeding in school. Although Allie had support, she also experienced betrayal by adults in a position of trust including her school counselor. Despite the trauma Allie experienced during her childhood, she described feeling appreciative of the struggles and would not change her past if she had the choice.

I feel like in the way that I’ve grown is I’ve definitely matured a lot, and I definitely feel like a different person, and I feel like I’m still getting used to the person that I feel like kinda. I’m still figuring out how I changed; I just know that I’ve changed. But there’s definitely so many things different about myself than before. I have time to not be in chaotic situation and it’s like I’m in full control of my life now, which gives me a lot of power and that’s kind of stressful, but it’s a good thing.

General Reactions

I prepared for interviews by intentionally setting aside any bias I have towards youth formerly in foster care. I had approximately an hour drive on the way to interviews

and often scheduled interviews after my workday ended. The travel time gave me the space to clear my head of any circumstances that occurred throughout the day related to foster care. In addition to my researcher journal, I kept a personal journal to note my thoughts and reactions towards anything related to this study that came up for me in my work life. This journal helped me incorporate some of what I was hearing from the youth at work, while keeping the data and my experience of this study separate.

Although each interview was a unique experience for me as a person and as a researcher, in general I found a consistent emotional reaction I had after every interview was gratitude. I felt immense gratitude for the young people who took time out of their busy lives to open up to me and describe intense experiences in foster care. I experienced the young people as brave, highly intelligent, resilient, and inspirational.

It was important to me as a researcher to be sensitive to bias and being aware of how my experience in my professional experiences with the foster care system and as a former school counselor and future school counselor educator. I initially assumed there would be something unique or special about the participant's experiences that made the difference for them and ultimately led to their academic success. In my journal, I noted: "I remember the students in foster care that I worked with as a school counselor and the students were either successful academically or unsuccessful. This was usually due to having a stable foster home environment and supportive foster parents. The students who were not successful typically had multiple schools on their transcripts and experienced gaps in school." This bias was not something that emerged in the data, and all of the participants challenged my initial biases in this study.

Each participant experienced significant challenges throughout their K-12 experience. The youth in this study experienced multiple foster care placements that were described as a mix of supportive and unsupportive environments. The majority of participants experienced different types of school settings, from traditional K-12 school environments to residential treatment or youth correctional facilities. Many of the participants had significant academic barriers such as learning disabilities, severe depression, and for some, years of academic content missing from their school experiences. At the end of the data collection phase of this study, I noted my overall reaction to the participants in my researcher journal, “It did not matter what the system or people would have thrown at these youth. They were going to make it and earn a high school diploma no matter what. They persevered despite people and systems, and I have no doubt their successes will continue throughout their lives.”

Reactions to Participants

Zach. Zach was my first participant in this study. I felt a sense of responsibility to honor Zach’s experience, and hoped the questions I developed in my interview protocol would elicit responses that would fully describe his experiences. Zach challenged my biases in the first few minutes of the interview when he described his first few years in elementary school. Zach’s school instability and extended absences from school did not have a significant impact on his academic experience later on in his academic career. After the interview I wrote in my researcher journal, “I literally gave a presentation earlier this week where I talked about the educational trajectory of children who do not meet early educational milestones, and this interview is a good reminder that not all students will struggle during school if they did not have a solid start in elementary

school.” I noted additional biases to be aware of in future interviews in my researcher journal and planned to revisit them prior to the next interview. I experienced Zach as a strong person who will make a difference in the lives of others and will continue to experience academic success.

Coby. Coby was the second participant in this study. After the first interview, I revisited my journal and noted my reactions to the first interview. I entered this interview by being aware of biases in order to participate as a researcher in this interview in a fresh and open way. I noted the following in my researcher journal after the interview, “My biases are challenged yet again about my perception of the foster care system as it relates to those who experience academic success and those who do not. Coby’s experiences in the foster care system were just like so many I have heard about from youth who did not graduate, much less go to college. I think Coby graduated despite the system throwing everything at him that usually results in poor academic outcomes.” My overall reactions to Coby were positive, and I found the same feeling of gratitude after the interview as in the first interview.

Precious. I experienced her as forthcoming and open in telling me about her life experiences and significant trauma she experienced. Precious cried a number of times in her interview and I cried with her on occasion. I experienced a variety of emotions in this interview including sadness, anger toward the people that hurt her emotionally and at the systems that did not protect her. I had to process my desire to become a caretaker for Precious and had to remind myself several times during the interview that I was there as a researcher and needed to set aside my emotions about her experience. This interview was a learning experience for me as a new researcher. I processed what I experienced through

journals and noting my experience in this interview with the coding team and external auditor to note any bias that may have come through or was inconsistent my interactions with other participants.

Tristan. My experience of Tristan was positive. This was the fourth interview I conducted in the span of two weeks. I found myself reflecting on Tristan's interview as I listened to other participant recordings and noting several themes he discussed in relation to other participant experiences. As with previous participants, I found an overwhelming sense of gratitude for Tristan's willingness to share painful and profound past experiences of trauma and recovery. My initial reaction to Tristan was that he is someone who is wise beyond his years and a deep thinker. I wrote the following initial reaction to the interview in my researcher journal, "Tristan's use of metaphors and vocabulary were beyond his years. He is an old soul." Tristan talked about his experiences as someone who has had decades to process their trauma, and his use of metaphors to describe his experiences in foster care helped the research team contextualize the results.

Izzy. Izzy was the only person who participated in the interview via Skype, and I was thankful Skype was an option, as Izzy was currently overseas in a semester abroad through her university. Although the Skype format did not impact the quality of the interview, I perceived Izzy's interview in a different light when I read through her written transcript. I noted the following in my researcher journal about this experience, "During the interview I experienced Izzy as someone who persevered, made it through to the other side of trauma, and has a bright future ahead of her. My experience reading through the written transcript is not congruent with how I experienced Izzy in the interview, in that the written transcript brings her depression and ongoing impact of trauma to light in a

different way than I heard her words.” I discussed this with the coding team to note any bias I may have had in this interview as compared to other interviews. I processed these experiences with my coding team and the external auditor and they did not note any bias in my codes or the written transcript.

Vanessa. I experienced Vanessa as one of the strongest, resourceful, and resilient people I encountered in my career related to foster care. Vanessa was the fifth person I interviewed for this study. She opened my eyes to the way in which systems can have a lasting impact on educational opportunities. The mobility Vanessa experienced and subpar educational experiences in facilities prevented her from having a typical high school experience. I wrote the following related to this in my researcher journal, “I am outraged at the child welfare systems that are meant to protect young people in foster care as I listened to the recording of Vanessa’s interview again. I wish Vanessa did not have to experience so many people who let her down. She is clearly a gifted and bright individual, and I have no doubt that she will succeed in life despite what the system has done to her AND I am angry for her. She should have had more options. Her story is unfair and unjust.” I noted these reactions to the coding team and the external auditor.

Jim. At this point in the study, many of the participants described the negative experiences they had with school counselors. I almost expected Jim’s experiences to be negative, but that was not the case. When Jim said, “school counselors played a really really really big role for me” I found myself surprised and relieved. She indicated that school counselors played an important role for her by allowing space and time to process her home and school life. Her description of these experiences gave me hope and I noted the simplicity of what the counselors provided to make her feel supported in my

researcher journal, “Jim reminded me the power of simply being there for another person, to have no expectations of them, to focus on the needs of the student and their needs.”

Jim’s experiences with school counselors gave me hope because she listed some tangible ways that her school counselors supported her that can be used to inform the profession.

Desiree. I experienced Desiree as an up-beat and warm young woman. When we met for our interview, she greeted me with a big smile and started a natural conversation right away. I wrote the following in my researcher journal about Desiree, “I felt connected to Desiree when she described her experiences in K-12 with people underestimating her, pre-judging her and treating her accordingly. I identify with her positive and upbeat spirit, and can relate to how she was treated. I see a lot of myself in Desiree at her age. I found myself needing to be aware and bracket this connection throughout the interview as to not over-identify with this participant.” This experience was something I noted to the coding team and external auditor in the review of my codes and transcripts.

Allie. Allie was the final interview in this study. My reactions to Allie were positive and I found similar strength in her as I did with other participants in relation to her strength and resiliency. Allie continued to challenge my assumptions and biases in regards to the impact of school mobility and academic performance. Allie experienced more school moves than any other participant, and yet, she did not indicate the moves had much of an impact on her ability to perform in school. I experienced Allie as strong, adaptable, and driven despite the profound trauma she experience she had in her home life.

Results

As noted in Chapter III, the research team came to consensus on the eight primary themes and 43 secondary themes based on the data. The final identification of themes included: within the home environment; impact on learning; within the foster care system; impactful connections; emotional impact; motivators; and posttraumatic growth. In this section, I will present the themes with supporting quotes, as well as a visual figure to assist readers in understanding the primary and secondary themes.

Themes

The final themes are presented below, including participant quotes that provide a rich and thick description of the participants' experiences. The themes are categorized as follows: themes that describe participants' experiences prior to being placed in foster care, emotional experiences and reactions participants encountered throughout their K-12 journey, the impact that trauma and experiences within the foster care system had on learning, participants' experiences within the foster care system, impactful connections participants made in their journey to postsecondary education, participants' experiences and view of school counselors, factors that impacted motivation to complete a high school credential and pursue a postsecondary education, and participant's experiences with posttraumatic growth.

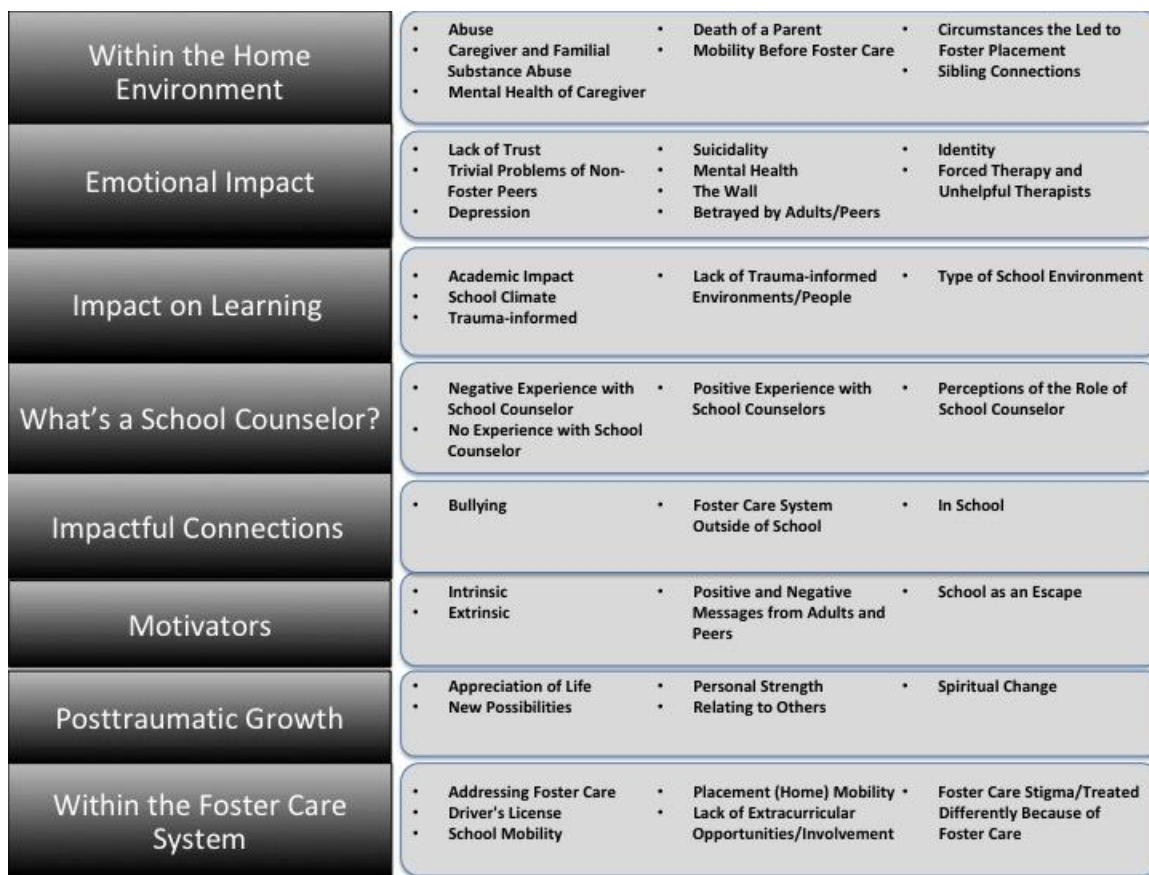


Figure 1: Diagram of Themes

Within the Home Environment

This theme refers to the circumstances and experiences of the participants before being placed into foster care, as well as caregiver behavior during foster care. Nine participants endorsed this theme by describing traumatic experiences that led to their removal from the home, and for some, the trauma that continued in the foster care system. This theme is different from emotional impact as this theme refers specifically to the trauma itself and not the emotional impact it had on the participant. Six secondary themes emerged within this overarching theme: abuse, caregiver and familial substance abuse, death of a parent, mental health of caregiver, mobility before foster care,

circumstances that led to foster care placement, and sibling connections. A description of each secondary theme and supporting quotes are listed in this section.

Abuse. Three participants referred to various types of abuse they encountered by caregivers before and sometimes during foster care (e.g. physical, emotional). Some participants referenced emotional reactions to abuse, which is listed as a separate theme in this study. Other participants described the abuse they endured without noting any emotional reactions and noted abusive situations that happened in a matter of fact manner.

But then I got pulled out of school at my second-grade year to get homeschooled. So that's where everything happened. The whole abuse happened was when I was homeschooled, second grade to fifth grade.—Vanessa

My mom was a severe narcissist and she is a fantastic actress, like she fools me all the time like, “oh she cares about me.” No, she fools me too. But now I’ve always said it, like I’ve always told every single professional, “I do not want a relationship with my mother, like it’s not safe, it’s not healthy, it’s not anything.—Izzy

So she grabbed my phone and I tried to grab it back, and then it turned into a physical altercation. She ended up sitting on top of me so I couldn’t breathe, and holding me down, and hitting me and stuff. So then I grabbed a bookshelf and I pushed it down onto her so she could get off, and then she wouldn’t get off me, so then I had to squirm around and we were just fighting. And she grabbed my laptop that I bought brand new, and I saved up all my money to get it for school. She threw it down the stairs and broke it.—Allie

Caregiver and familial substance abuse. Five out of nine participants indicated caregiver substance abuse was one of the primary reasons for being placed in foster care. In addition to the primary caregiver’s substance abuse, some participants described witnessing substance use and abuse in their homes.

I had a lot of change—I had to do a lot of adapting. And so I’d say in the earlier years, before I was involved with DHS [child welfare], I moved a lot with my parents and they were—they would abuse drugs, alcohol and meth, specifically with my mom.—Tristan

Things at home started to become more unstable. My mom had a lot of back problems and had to have several surgeries. She had a pretty big dependency on pain killers.—Jim

And just that was when it was really bad at home, too, because my aunt and my dad were – my dad – my dad's a good guy, but he just went through a rough path – a really rough time, and he – you know, there was drug using when grandma was really sick, so home was crazy.—Desiree

So basically how I ended up in foster care is my house got raided 'cause my parents were sort of running a little drug ring inside my house.—Zach

Death of a parent. Three of the nine participants experienced the death of a parent. One participant experienced the loss of her father before entering foster care and two participants experienced the death of their mothers while in the foster care system.

I think that there are a lot of things that I wish I didn't have to face. I mean I wish my mom didn't have a drug addiction that ended up taking her life.—Jim

I found out she had passed away around the same age that I was put back into foster care...I'll never have my mom here to guide me, to show me.—Precious

Mental health of caregiver. Two participants indicated their biological parents experienced various disorders such as bipolar depression, narcissism, and delusions. Participants described what it was like for them to live with a primary caregiver with mental health issues that had an impact on them.

She's never been diagnosed, but my aunt and I think that she has paranoid schizophrenia, so she doesn't really stay in reality very well. So throughout my life we've been to eight domestic violence shelters.—Allie

It was just when I wasn't attending school for weeks, I had to say something more, like I couldn't just say, "Oh, I'm sick." No, I had to tell them. And part of it, I think it was just so many things all at once, like with my crappy family, and my dad was suicidal.—Izzy

Mobility before foster care. Five participants described experiencing home and school mobility prior to being involved in the foster care system. Various circumstances

led to participants to attend multiple schools outside of regular grade promotion before and during foster care. Some participants experienced multiple out-of-home placements before being removed permanently from their caregivers.

I got taken out of placement officially three times, and they usually—DHS specifically, usually only gives parents one chance; they gave my mom three chances. And so after the third chance, my younger siblings got adopted, and I—right now I am living with a family friend. I've lived with them for a while now.—Tristan

So I lived with my grandparents to begin with, start my schooling, 'cause they didn't really trust my parents to get me into school. So I lived there, and I switched over back to my parents halfway through first grade. I finished off first grade going to a school super far away from me. Then second to third, I didn't really honestly go to school at all for most of it. I missed a lot of the part of it. And even going to summer school when I was supposed to, didn't do that. So second and third grade was just a wash for me. So when I moved to my grandparents over to fourth grade, it was finally a solid school.—Zach

My family was living in [state] – no, [state]. When I first went, I went to a private school in [state]. So I didn't have no family communication. But I think, to be honest with you, I don't really – I didn't pay attention when I first went, because it was like, I just got done homeschooling and I was in a different state, I could do whatever I wanted, my mom couldn't punish me, so I never paid attention in that school. But I do remember, after I got kicked out of that private school, my mom sent me to another one in [a different state].—Vanessa

Circumstances that led to foster care placement. This secondary theme includes unique circumstances that led to foster placement not already captured in the other secondary themes within the primary “within the home environment” theme. All nine participants endorsed this theme.

So the school got really strict, and I actually got into truancy court through that. They would have the school resource officer come down and pick me up, but a lot of the time they would try and pick me up, and I would be sick. I was sick for 70 percent of the year, so most of the time I didn't go because of that reason. And then I would just get up, play video games, same routine every day.—Tristan

Well, I got into the foster care when I was 14, so I'd just finished eighth grade, technically. So then I was admitted to a mental hospital, so when I got out, my

adoptive family didn't wanna take me back, so that's why I got into foster care.—
Izzy

I also got myself removed from my home and ended up forcing social services to let me live with a friend and his family.—Jim

Sibling connections. Three participants mentioned connections to their biological siblings during the interview process. While this was not a prevalent theme for the majority of participants, this secondary theme describes the different experiences the participant's siblings had in the foster care system. Several participants noted being separated from siblings in the foster care system. Some noted their siblings had vastly different experiences within the foster care system and educational outcomes.

Yeah. I don't know, me and him are like night and day. If you look at us, we look the same, but our mindset are two completely different things. Like as a child, we'd fight every day, and it was a bloody mash just trying to beat each other up... It's sort of like what I saw with my brother. He has all these issues, and then he can't focus in school. Then you get sent to a group home where the schooling there is just kind of awful in my opinion. By the time you get out of the group home – by the time he was in, he came back his junior year, and he would've been a freshman. So he's two years behind schools. So at that point, I think it's a little difficult to even think about graduating high school, much less going on to college.—Zach

Emotional Impact

This theme refers to the participant's description of the emotional impact the experiences before, during, and at after foster care placement had on them. All participants endorsed this theme and noted the varying emotions they had in response to the trauma they experienced in the context of their home, social, and school environments. Participants referred to general experiences with emotional impact as well as nine secondary themes: identity, difficulty relating to trivial problems of non-foster peers, depression suicidality, mental health, forced therapy and unhelpful therapists,

betrayed by adults and peers, lack of trust, the wall. The “emotional impact” primary theme and each secondary themes are explored below with supporting quotes.

I would forget to do an assignment or something, and I was like, "I just forgot." 'Cause I'm one of those kids, I'd never use the planner 'cause I can go through all the subjects and know what I have. Every now and again, something would just – I would just not be on my A game, and it would just suck. One, I felt bad I missed an assignment, and I'm failing this, and the other, I'm over here having all these issues. It was just a lot.—Zach

For me it impacts the fact, like I said, I couldn't socialize normally. I just never learned those social skills. Minus the whole treatment part – I don't know what to call it. I was just so antisocial. I feel like I wouldn't have been like that if I had the chance to be a kid, you know? —Vanessa

Yeah. And, you know, like being a person from trauma, I've just – I – I've never really felt like I really fit in. Like I never felt like connected to a community. And I've tried the [engaging in a program in college], and I just didn't feel right. So I guess it's – and I know that's normal for kids with trauma just not fitting in, and I know that's even more normal for kids with ADHD that are still misunderstood. So a lot of it I've just kind of accepted it and acknowledged that I do feel this way, and a lot of it is just me and it's not anybody else. I just interpret things a little different – not like different, but I just – my experience has made me scared.—Desiree

Identity. Identity refers to the changes in family and home settings and the emotional impact those experiences had on them. Four participants endorsed this theme. Some participants did not know where they fit in after being removed from their homes and experiencing unstable and inconsistent home environments. This secondary theme also refers to some participants experience with the loss of culture they experienced when they were no longer living with their biological parents.

Instead of letting your kid find themselves, so I completely shut down– you know what I mean? [The foster care system] It's kinda taking their identity. It doesn't allow them to grow or to figure things out on their own.—Vanessa

So I lost – I feel like I lost a lot of culture, like Hispanic because I don't speak the language but all my Hispanic friends they have traditional things that I really like. And especially coming from a Hispanic family to a white family, single mom, like that was very – like that was a shock to me. I didn't realize how shocking it

was until I got away from it. And she was – she's amazing. She's amazing. But I just didn't realize like how much – like how isolating that felt.—Desiree

My personality has definitely changed. Sophomore year I was a completely different person. I don't know. I feel like I've become more open and down to Earth, and I – I don't know. When I was a freshman and I was a sophomore, I was very preppy and I was kinda mean, and I'd wear a lot of makeup, and I wasn't – I don't know. I was very different and I was very loud and talkative, and – I don't know. I feel like I'm polar opposites of myself, and I feel like in the way that I've grown is I've definitely matured a lot, and I definitely feel like a different person, and I feel like I'm still getting used to the person that I feel like kinda. I'm still figuring out how I changed; I just know that I've changed. But there's definitely so many things different about myself than before.—Izzy

Difficulty relating to trivial problems of non-foster peers. This secondary theme refers to the way participant's experienced hearing about the problems that their non-foster peers told them. Four participants endorsed this theme having a difficult time relating to the problems their peers describe such as having to do laundry or not getting an iPhone for Christmas. Participants indicated it was difficult for them to hear about these types of problems when they have experienced significant trauma and barriers related to being in foster care.

So – and I think that's what's been difficult or been cool and then difficult about being in college is that there are so little foster care and there's a lot of privilege in college. That's been really hard because it's like – especially within my sorority, it's like these girls have really good GPAs. And it's like, yeah, you're right. You should. You've had everything handed – not handed but you've had the opportunities. You've had people working with you. Like there's no excuse for you to have a low GPA.—Desiree

'Cause those were the people that I were with, they had cars at 16 and phones and everything. I had to work for everything I have.—Izzy

I remember when I first started dating my husband, I would get really angry because in college, his mom would do his laundry. His mom would send him home with food for the week. I would get so mad and I didn't understand. I was like, "I don't know why this angers me so much," but I never experienced that. For him, it was totally normal. For me, I was like, "This is absolutely and completely mind blowing because I've had to make my own meals and do my own laundry since I was 14."—Jim

Depression. Four participants referred to experiences with depression before and during foster care. Several participants described feeling isolated in their depression and did not open up to anyone about their feelings. They described how symptoms of depression impacted them in and out of school.

I mean I think that, for instance, not being able to go to school. I mean I had really paralyzing anxiety and depression. There would be days where I literally couldn't get out of bed. Or where I would cry even if you smiled at me. I would just have anxiety about going to the store. I think that those things were -- I needed to be able to be given the space but also have the support to be able to work through those things.—Izzy

I went through a little – eighth-grade year, I went through sort of a mini depression I guess. In school I would probably talk – say five or six words, and I would get my lunch and go to my math teacher's class and do homework just so – I didn't wanna go outside. And I didn't smile, didn't do anything. Really the only thing that was fun was getting home. I could sort of be myself, hang out with the other foster kids. But – yeah, so that messed with me. I actually did better during that time in school, 'cause I wasn't hanging out. I was just paying attention. But stress-wise it's – you can't really be – I don't know.—Coby

Yeah, part of it's like it's just always a spiral, like things start getting a little worse, and then once my grades dropped, that's when I go way down 'cause that means a lot to me, and if I can't keep that up, I give up.—Desiree

Suicidality. Several participants experienced depression but did not indicate a past with suicidal thoughts or actions. Four participants did experience prolonged experience with depression and suicide attempts. School was often the last thing on the participant's mind during these times.

I'm definitely a really good student, but during the first part, like during middle school, yeah, pretty much middle school, living with my parents, I didn't care at all because at that point, I was trying to kill myself, so I did not care at all about school at that point in time. I knew I was falling behind, but I had bigger fish to fry. So that was really, really bad, really awful.—Izzy

Mental health. In addition to the anxiety and depression noted by several participants, three participants described the mental health impact of foster care in

general. Their experiences with trauma had an impact on mental health in the immediate aftermath of trauma and had lasting consequences in and out of school.

It was a whole bunch of anxiety. So school, specifically, it was a whole bunch of anxiety and – I don't know. I remember sitting in class a lot of the days just being really anxious. But when I was in school – it was just a matter of getting to school. Once I was in school, I was really good at having friends, meeting new people, that kinda thing. Schoolwork I just – I would just refuse to do it. I don't know why. I feel like there's some sort of science behind it that I don't know of, but I just – I had really trouble just focusing, I would say.—Tristan

The whole experience just, looking outside of it, it's kind of just a whole interesting kind of as well situation that I landed into, looking outside. On the inside, basically you're in a tornado.—Zach

It was hard, you know, sometimes not feeling always at ease or feeling like you have somebody to go talk to or feel like sometimes... and sometimes I felt like I didn't always have the support like everybody else.—Coby

Forced therapy and unhelpful therapists. Four participants describe being “forced” into therapy during their time in the foster care system. In general, participants viewed therapy something that was not helpful in trauma recovery. For most of the participants, therapy was another choice they did not get to make in their own lives. Participants also described what was particularly unhelpful in therapy.

Therapy... I had – there was – I have a very biased opinion around therapy, just based on my personal ethos. So I was – I had to meet with a counselor once a week, and that was just to kinda talk about grades, talk about what's going on in life, what's rough, what do I need help with outside of school. It was just kind of a waste of my time because if I did tell 'em anything, they wouldn't really help. I think that genuine therapists help more than counselors, but only if you want it. You know what I mean? If you ask for the help, then you should receive the help, but otherwise, there's no need for it.—Tristan

I felt like I didn't have the right therapist. So I was wondering how it might've been if I was getting the right therapy or more attention from them, like how I would've viewed relationships or like with my mom because that was really difficult just like forming the mother-daughter relationship at such an older age.—Desiree

So I think that's the hardest part, and a lot of foster kids really hate therapy, and I think it's because they can't find the right person for them, and it just takes so long. It took me eight years to find someone who was actually good for me that I could trust that didn't have any responsibility to tell my mom anything.—Allie

But I wish people had understood that, like, I didn't care for therapy. They banged it into me forever and ever, and it was just wasn't my thing, so I wish people would've just, like, let that go and let me just do school.—Vanessa

Betrayed by peers and adults. This secondary theme refers to the experiences of betrayal from adults, including biological parents, family members, foster parents, school and child welfare personnel, and peers in and out of school. Youth describe putting trust in these people and having their trust violated. Circumstances include events that occurred before and during being in the foster care system. Four participants endorsed this theme.

And then on top of that, my actual adoptive parents – I think they caused me a lot more trauma when they put me back into foster care because it felt like again they didn't really know how to handle the situation, and it sucks being told you're gonna be in a forever family and then going back.—Precious

They [my foster parents] rearranged one of the guest rooms into my room, and I was like, “Oh, yeah, this is nice. My own room.” And they just said, “Well, keep your actions up and you’ll be moving closer to the door.”—Coby

[My school counselor] She’d check in with me every single day. She was so helpful. But then as I kinda – a couple weeks later, she just dropped off the face of the earth and kinda was like, “Oh, well, you need to do this yourself now. You need to pick up yourself.” And it was right when I was getting really, really depressed and she didn’t totally take it serious.—Allie

And friends, friends were hard too. When one of my placements was falling through, I was obviously trying to take care of myself, and my friends broke off with me because they said that I was victimizing myself and it was all about me, and things like that because I was depressed, and I guess I was sharing that with them because I was trying to find help. And they weren't in the position to help me nor should they have been, but they added to it by saying all these mean things.—Izzy

Lack of trust. Four participants described feelings of mistrust and a sense of being guarded with others as a result of previous betrayals by peers and adults. For some participants, their lack of trust in others was rooted in their experiences before foster care. Several participants also described their lack of trust in others was a result of not having a voice in decisions that impacted their lives such as home and school placements.

Really, you kinda have to. It's not that you can't depend on somebody. It's that you can't sometimes depend on people, you know? Again, every situation's different, but for the simple fact that mine was so unstable I couldn't depend on a lot of people.—Precious

So I didn't know all that was going on, and it didn't bother me that much 'cause, again, I don't trust easily. But, yeah, I mean, it's just another thing that you go through. Yeah, it [foster care] didn't really make you wanna be like, "Wow. I trust you."—Vanessa

The wall. The term "the wall" refers to the emotional wall participants described as a way from protecting themselves from additional trauma. For example, "the wall" kept several participants from forming new relationships in or out of school. The specific term "the wall" was identified specifically by the participants. Four participants endorsed this theme.

Because I knew "I'm not gonna see you soon, so I really don't care if we're friends or not" you know? And I feel like that kinda made me have a meaner personality, and I'm not mean. I'm really sweet. Especially people with trauma, they have a wall as it is, and it's harder to break down those walls, and I feel like in school it was really hard for me to break down those walls because of the fact there was nothing to be any stability.—Precious

An emotional wall, just a security wall for myself, for my emotions, for my own insecurities because of the fact that you can't choose who you go to as a foster kid.—Coby

So I think that's why kids grow a wall. They even grow a wall with their foster parents, you know? Being moved from place to place to place, you had your wall down with these people, and now you have to have a whole wall up with these

people 'cause you don't know them. You can't trust what they're gonna do or what they're gonna say.—Izzy

I felt like I shut down a lot. Like I kind of – I didn't really isolate myself, but I would push people away so that I wouldn't get hurt anymore.—Jim

Within the Foster Care System

All nine participants described their experiences within in the foster care system during their journey to a postsecondary education. This theme encompasses the essence of the participant's experiences with the foster care system. The participants experienced a variety of foster care settings as a whole and separately (e.g. group homes, foster homes, kinship placements, residential treatment facilities). Although the experiences were different, there were common themes that emerged across participants regardless of placement type or the age they experienced foster care. Several general statements stood out as representing the participant's experience of the foster care system.

I think that, a lot of times kids who go into foster care, any amount of control is immediately stripped away from them. It's not ever a choice and it's not ever a process. It's one night you go to sleep and the next day you wake up and everything is different. I think that it's those practices that have the good intent but that do the most harm. Where if a kid, or any person for that matter, is living in trauma and they're already used to taking care of themselves and they're already used to doing this, this and this. You can't just take it away from them and expect no ramifications. Even if there are negative responses to something that is -- has all of the right intent, that you need to be prepared to talk through that and to walk through it instead of being, "Oh. You just lashed out. You're going to go to detention."—Jim

I think one of the most damaging things about foster care is just not having any power at all. And same within my childhood too, like it was just my mother was dominating everything. I couldn't do anything right. I couldn't do anything, period, and the same thing with foster care.—Izzy

I think for foster kids, if the system took the time to know them more, there would be more success in this percentage, 'cause you gotta worry about dealing with drama in group homes, dealing with dramas with your group-home parent, your caseworker. You really don't have time to think about school. You just gotta survive, really, is just how it feels. You're in this, like, war you can't get out of.

That's how it felt for me. I was just like, as soon as I was accomplishing something, something else would happen, and I'm just like, "Oh my god, I can't catch a break," so school was the last thing on my mind.—Vanessa

Six secondary themes emerged across participants related to experiences within the foster care system: Addressing foster care, foster care stigma and being treated differently as a result of being in the foster care system, lack of extracurricular opportunities or involvement, placement (home) mobility, school mobility, and driver's license. The majority of participants experienced the secondary themes in the "within foster care system" primary theme to some extent with the exception of the secondary theme "lack of extracurricular opportunities and involvement", which was referenced by three of the nine participants. Each of the secondary themes within this overarching theme is described below with supporting quotes.

Addressing foster care. This secondary theme is related to the participant's experiences with being put in the position to explain their involvement with foster care and/or struggle with what to call foster parents. For example, one participant described asking a coach to introduce his foster father with the youth's last name so he would not have to address questions from peers. Another example of this secondary theme is a participant who was adopted from the foster care system and subsequently returned to the foster care system. The youth was in the position to explain to her peers why she was no longer living with her parents. Five participants endorsed this theme.

That first family that I lived with in elementary for a couple years, I remember before I got there, there were a brother and sister that lived there for three years before me and they would call [the foster parents] mom and dad, and I just was never really – 'cause every other house that I was in between, I would call them by their names. And so I would call them Mrs. [X], Mr. [X], and then I remember one night I called them Mom and Dad and it sort of stuck. And then I moved and I moved to in town. It took a little bit, but I called them Mom and Dad. And then after that move, I just decided no.—Coby

I think that was probably the hardest part of my school experience because again at this point majority of those kids I've grown up with at different schools, and having to explain to them "I'm back in foster care", I think that was the hardest part was that the situation was completely different, and at that point I was adopted, and having to explain to them "They just gave me back." You know what I mean?—Precious

Foster care stigma and being treated differently as a result of being in the foster care system. In addition to having to address the topic of being in foster care, five youth described experiences of being treated differently by peers, school personnel, and the foster care system in general because of their foster care status. The participants described keeping their foster care status from teachers or peers to avoid the special treatment or questions. Youth also described how school was different for them because of foster care in terms of not having the same opportunities as their non-foster peers.

Because they all knew I was in foster care. So I think they just had this stigma or something.—Precious

It's just – it's always so many questions once people find out. They sort of treat you differently, either for better or worse. Teachers would – I'd feel special treatment when not needed. I don't need this treatment. Just treat me like every other student. And then of course in middle school, people find that out. That's easy to pick on you about. Yeah, you have no control over it, so I just sorta wanna keep it to myself.”—Coby

I think that there's a response and I think that even if you're not in foster care and you're living with your own family, part of being a teenager is lashing out and making mistakes and being angry and being confused and hating the world. I think that it's a teenager's job to hate anything and everything around them. When you put a kid into foster care, you're not only taking away their whole life but then you're also saying, "Well, now you're not allowed to be a normal teenager." I think that there's a lot of things that are backwards there. If all teenagers, no matter what environment they're coming from, are doing really stupid things, that you can't expect a kid whose whole world just got turned upside down to not do some more stupid things.—Jim

In foster care they – obviously, there's documents on each kid, keep track of each kid. But each placement they would send you, they would give the person a paper

this big, have everything about you, and they're gonna highlight the most negative, such as if she's a runaway or she does drugs. They don't put your positive, this little part. They gotta let the people know the danger. I mean, initially, before you even get to someplace, they already have this thought of who you are, and it's like – and it can be something from, like, two years ago, and they don't update it. So when I first got in foster care, it was like, "Oh, she just came from a mental hospital" and this and this and this and this. So three years later, that's what they were still getting about me.—Vanessa

Lack of extracurricular opportunities or involvement. Three participants described instances where they were not able to participate or had a different experience in extracurricular activities at school due to being in foster care, lack of transportation, and school mobility. Several participants indicated that it was difficult to maintain extracurricular involvement in addition to their home lives. Another participant described being singled out for not having a driver's license to get to and from practice. Many of the participants indicated the mobility they experienced in school as a result of foster care made it difficult to maintain consistency on a sports team or other extracurricular opportunities.

I was on the swim team for a year. I ended up not being able to keep going just because it was really hard to wake up at 4:00 in the morning five days a week, especially when you kind of feel like you're living in a tornado.—Jim

Varsity practice upper-class years, it's really, "Oh, you guys are all juniors and seniors. You guys can leave practice when you want, because you guys have cars. You don't have parents waiting on you." I remember one time I of course go to the restroom whenever the coach says this, but he was like, "Practice is running late. Call or text your parents and let them know." And my [foster] dad comes into the gym yelling and shit, and he's just really upset, and I'm just like, "Well, if I had my license, none of this stuff would have happened." But I – it just – overall it's a lot more stressful just 'cause it's in the back of your head.—Coby

Placement (home) mobility. All of the participants experienced multiple foster placements throughout their time in foster care. Many of the participants experienced being placed in residential treatment facilities due to trauma response related behaviors.

The change in home placements was emotionally impactful for the participants. Changes in home placements often resulted in school moves and the participants indicated how they felt as if their wishes were not taken into consideration by foster care system personnel.

I also went to sort of a behavior place for three months. My caseworker – I – looking back on it, I do not agree that I should have been there. So I was there and I was in their minimal – the young kids group, and still all those kids are drugs, running away, all that and I was there for anger and not talking about my feelings. So it was really weird why I was there [laughs] with all these people that I was just scared of... it was over when my caseworker was like, "Okay. You're leaving next week." I was very upset and didn't like it, and I didn't really get to say bye to any of my friends. So I come back three months after I finish the program and everyone's like, "Where have you been?" and it was just sort of – it sort of sucked.—Coby

But they decided that that foster home just wasn't the best. I'm like, "Okay, you can make the decision, but can you at least let me finish five more days of school?" Why did it have to be the exact day? So it was just like, wow. It just felt like they didn't have any respect for my being, you know? It was just kinda like, things happen on their time with no consideration of, like, "Oh, how would this affect her, and her emotionally?—Vanessa

I actually ended up in treatment facilities, not even – I ended up in a home for a little bit, but you know, I ran from there, and nobody wants to keep getting put back in the system, so I kept running from all my placements, and then they put me in [a juvenile detention center], and I finished – I did majority of tenth, ninth grade in there, and then finished high school actually in [another city], and I finished high school with people I didn't even know.—Precious

School mobility. Six participants experienced mobility in school prior to being in the foster care system. Changes in home placements in or out of the foster care system often resulted in school moves. The consequences of mobility often included disengagement from developing impactful connections with peers and school personnel. Gaps in academic content and the lack of opportunity to earn high school credits were also a consequence of school mobility.

Most of – I’ve been to 14 different schools though, not in that timeframe – but it was from I’d say second grade until senior year. I was in a lot of schools... Cause I moved – I was in [one state] until I was in second grade, then second grade we moved to [another state], and then we moved back to [the first state] when I started fifth grade – no, fourth grade. We moved really fast. And then fourth grade we moved back to [another state], and then I moved back... –Allie

But I think the thing that really got to me most is I never had a consistent school. I never had consistent friends. Even with high school, I didn’t graduate from the high school that I started from.—Precious

How do you expect me to trust in my environment, where I’m supposed to be, if the second I take a deep breath, I’m just moved? It’s kinda hard to reintroduce yourself. It’s hard to re-make friends. You just kinda, like, go into the mindset like, “Okay, I’m gonna be here for a couple of months and then I’m gonna move,” so you don’t even try to make friends or you don’t even try to socialize with the teachers or participate. You’re just getting by. You’re just, like, dealing with it I guess... So that’s why I just got my GED, ‘cause I was like-they told me I wasn’t gonna graduate until I was like 20 because I was so behind, and when they started trying to send me to a normal school, I had no idea what the hell they were teaching. So I was like, “you know what, I’ll just get my GED and go onto postsecondary.”—Vanessa

Driver’s license. Two participants describe either not being able to get their driver’s license until they exited the foster care system, or encountering barriers as a result of being in foster care in obtaining a driver’s license (e.g. not being able to afford driver’s education courses, not having a parent to obtain insurance, not having proper documentation to qualify for a driver’s license). Participants spoke about how the lack of consistent transportation impeded their childhood and teenage years.

And then another thing that I can think of is trying to get my driver’s license was probably the most difficult thing I’ve ever done through the system. I did not do the traditional permit at 15, license 16. I had to write a letter to my judge saying that I would be – ‘cause I’m – foster care, you’re technically a liability to the state. So I had to explain that I would have to have full coverage and I would have my own insurance plan. I wouldn’t be on my foster parents, even though they offered, so just that whole process. And I didn’t get my license until the last four months of my senior year, and I had to pay so much more, because I wasn’t on a

family plan and I was a minor trying to – a male minor trying to get their driver's license. So insurance was really bad.—Coby

'Cause that [not having a driver's license] disables us from being able to – it's something that you need in life kind of, rather than take the bus. Buses don't go everywhere, and so it's just something people need nowadays...My GAL, she spent \$500.00 on the class. And then I took it; I passed it; I went to the DMV; and they told me – they were, like, "If no one's gonna sign off for your insurance or your liability, we can't give you your permit." So now that I'm 18 I gotta go in, get my permit.—Tristan

Impact on Learning

This primary theme refers to the participant's experiences in various school environments and the school personnel and peers they encountered during their time in K-12 education. The majority of participants experienced a variety of school settings and climates such as traditional K-12 schools, residential treatment facility schools, and youth correctional facilities. All nine participants referred to the impact these experiences had on their learning and academic journeys to postsecondary education in general.

Secondary themes include: academic impact (including the academic impact that participants are currently experiencing in postsecondary education), school climate, trauma-informed environments and people, lack of trauma-informed environments and people, and the type of school environment. Descriptions of each secondary theme and supporting quotes are listed below.

Academic impact. This secondary theme is in reference to the participant's experiences with academics while being in the foster care system. Six participants endorsed this secondary theme. There were varying degrees to which these experiences were positive or negative and the impact on learning and academic performance. For some participants, the gaps in academic curriculum and school mobility during their K-12 experience led to current academic challenges in their postsecondary schooling.

Supporting quotes for general academic impact and impact specific to postsecondary experiences are listed below.

I don't know, I think I kinda learned the basics when I was in private school. But I didn't – I don't think I have, like, an education level past the eighth grade, completely. I know enough, but I don't know calculus and all that bullshit. I don't know none of that. I know algebra, the basics, but nothing more. So it was pretty annoying. And they would do group therapies during class, too... So the teacher – we didn't even know if the teacher was even qualified. We didn't learn anything. We just colored all day. We would bring our crochet stuff to school and crochet. I don't even know how they're still running. I think it's because the therapeutic part of it is so good that they don't care. When the state comes to expect – I mean, they put on a show, because they let them know before they come. So when they know the state's gonna come, then they try to separate us into different classrooms. Like, that's never happened before.—Vanessa

And it wasn't until my second semester of freshman year in college that I was diagnosed... And so I was frustrated because I was like – you know, I was surrounded by these professionals and therapists and nobody really seemed to catch onto that. And, yeah, that's one of the things that really stood out to me because I struggled throughout school, and it's not like I haven't cared in high school or in like middle school. It's just like I had extenuating circumstances that were holding me back... look at all this background. I'm like, "I need help now. I need to do this now. I'm failing my classes."... And so, yeah, it wasn't until the end of the second semester. And my GPA was really, really low. Like it's a 1.3 right now, and it's like that doesn't reflect me in any way.—Desiree

School climate. Four participants noted how they experienced various school climates during their time in K-12 education. This secondary theme included the culture of the school, socioeconomic status of the students, and norms within the school related to peers and school personnel. Participants describe how various school climates influenced the type of experience they had during their time attending that particular institution.

Well, the nickname is Vanilla Valley because it's just all the same people, you know, there's no diversity whatsoever, and I think a lot of the teachers are so used to working with the same people that they complete forget that when things happen like that, they're like, "I don't know how to deal with this because no one has ever told us," as a student probably there.—Izzy

I would never go back to middle school again. It was just terrible. The teachers in my middle school weren't very personable. 'Cause there was a lot of faculty drama in my school. We were switching through principals like every year. Yeah, it was just hard to make a connection with some of the teachers there. Once I got into high school, I was able to start to build some of those connections again, which was pretty cool.—Zach

Trauma-informed environments and trauma-informed people. Collectively, the participants attended multiple schools due to mobility. Five participants described experiences with school environments where they felt safe and connected and the people that helped them in school. The trauma-informed school environments they described had specific people who promoted building healthy relationships (e.g. creating individualized school curriculum, and taking time to listen to youth's wishes).

As far as teachers, a lot of them are pretty understanding because I'm pretty sure I was, I was honest with them, and so they tried to work with me to get me through it, but a lot of it was I was in mental hospitals because I was really depressed and I was worried about my own safety, so I was missing a lot of school. When you miss school, you can't help but fall behind.—Izzy

I remember my junior year of high school, I set up a meeting with my academic counselor and my principal. I sat them down and was like, "This is not a safe place for me. I can't be here." I had it set up so that I could do a work study where I was getting credit for my work, but also not necessarily have to be in the classroom unless I was coming in for a test or something. I would do a lot of studies on my own at home, and then just bring my completed work to my teachers. I kind of made my later years of high school a little more unconventional. I think that was a really critical experience for me. Schools are pretty tough about attendance. If you're not coming, you're going to get on this list and go to court and da da da da da. I think that had those people not been completely understanding with my circumstances and where I was coming from personally and emotionally and kind of not necessarily having a safe space anywhere, that they really supported me to try and take care of myself. I think that that is what enabled me to get out of there and be able to start doing things on my own, which I needed to do.—Jim

Lack of trauma-informed environments or people. In contrast, four participants noted environments that they felt were systemically not trauma-informed.

The participants noted how these school environments or school personnel did not assist them in their trauma recovery, noting they felt the systems and people within those systems were not trauma-informed. These experiences occurred in all types of school settings noted by the participants.

I didn't like them because mental health and stuff, like one of my really good friends, she was abused at home, and she was never taken to foster care. She was taken to 24-hour thing. I forgot what it was called, but she was taken to a shelter or something like that. But she had attempted suicide on campus and one of the vice principals had told her, like, "Okay, if you're going to kill yourself, don't do it here. Go somewhere else." And just outrageous stuff that they'd say. —Allie

Yeah, I think a lot of the times teachers, students alike, anyone that works in a public school, sometimes they forget that they're the outliers, and they think, you know, they're so in the ritual of dealing with the same people over and over again that they forget that sometimes these kids have problems outside of school and maybe there's a reason why they're not fully paying attention in class, and there's a reason they're getting behind and not wanting to try.—Jim

I always felt like they didn't really see me as like someone that could be success in this. I felt like maybe they'd like me – like I was making excuses for things going on but I – they didn't really take into consideration what I was going through and try to see things from my perspective, which I felt like could've made the bigger difference.—Desiree

Type of school environment. This secondary theme refers to the various K-12 school settings participants experienced such as traditional K-12 schools, homeschooling, residential treatment facilities, etc. Participants often experienced multiple school settings during their K-12 education. Three participants provided descriptions of these types of environments and supporting quotes are listed below.

'Cause you know in treatment facilities, it's not like traditional schooling, but I tried to make sure I got all of the information that I could. I would go above and beyond, ask questions, because I wanted to make sure I at least kept something for myself, and that was my education.—Precious

I don't know if you've heard of [a treatment facility]. I started going there for school. It's a treatment facility. It's for girls, like, running away issues, stuff like that. I didn't live there; I just went there for the school part. And a lot of things

about treatment facilities, I've been to, I don't know, like five or six of them, and they don't really focus on the education aspect. Legally they have to send you to some kinda school, whether it's there or they have their own school that they provide. But it's more focused on treatment, whether it be drug abuse, therapy. So I feel like I didn't really learn anything that I need to learn, starting high school ninth grade to – I got my GED 12th, so I never really did 12th grade. So those three years at my school, I don't think I really learned much that I needed to learn for education level. It was just about getting me therapy. I was doing, like, sixth-grade work or eighth-grade work that I knew.—Vanessa

What's a School Counselor?

The theme title “what’s a school counselor” refers to the varying experiences all participants had (or did not have) with their school counselors. Some participants did not recall any encounters with school counselors at any time during K-12 years. Some participants needed prompts to know what a school counselor meant (e.g. they needed to hear the term guidance counselor to make the connection). Participant’s experiences were on the extreme end of positive or negative, and while describing these experiences, they referred to *what* the specific instances or traits that were memorable/impactful and why.

Negative experiences with school counselors. Negative experiences with school counselors often included being forced to see a school counselor. Four participants described these experiences as punitive in nature, or feeling devalued by the school counselor. For example, feeling like the school counselor was not genuine or did not believe in them as students or individuals. Four participants described not having a choice in meeting with their school counselor and the negative impact that had on their relationship with the school counselor. Three participants described experiences where they talked with their school counselor about issues that needed to be reported to a parent (e.g. suicidality or cutting). Participants describe how the reporting was handled by the

school counselor and the impact that had on their relationship and future interactions with the school counselor.

I know there were other counselors at my high school. There was one lady I did not like at all 'cause she was just very nitpicky. We had some kind of like, I think we were inside an academic advising session, and she was just getting on my nerves 'cause she's like, "You need to catch up. You need to do this. Why are you behind?" And I was just like, "You don't understand what I'm going through. Give me five minutes." Yeah, and sometimes it just depends on the person for you because my counselor was not best friends with everyone, you know. And the person that I really despised was probably really great with someone else, so it's just finding someone that works with you, and I have worked with so many therapists, but the only that's worked is the one most recent.—Izzy

Yeah. It was almost as if she just wanted the attention and drama of being involved in the situation, 'cause it was a small school. There was only [a small number of] people in my grade, and she just very much wanted to be involved and look like she was a part of it. But when it came down to it and she actually had to do her job and actually be a counselor, she was not interested. And it was just more of she wanted the cred of, "Oh, yeah, yeah, I did this," and my caseworker was super happy I had her and stuff, and – I don't know.... Yeah, before, she was awesome, super there for my and everything. After, she made me feel horrible about myself and she was kinda one of the reasons like, "Oh, I really wanna die." She's kinda one of those reasons, and she made me feel crazy, and it sucked.—Allie

Yeah, [suicide] assessment. And she – I was just like – she's like, "Do you wanna die?" and I was like, "Well, obviously," and I was like – I wasn't trying to be mean to her, but it was like – she was asking very weird questions and that was before we even did the assessment. And she was very – I don't know. It seemed like she was almost like, "Oh, my God. This again?" and – I don't know. And she – we did the assessment, I ranked low, and I was fine. I was just sad. And she ended up ignoring those results and she – I remember her grabbing my shoulders, and shaking me, and saying, "Do I need to call the ambulance for you?" and I was like, "No," and – I don't know. She just was not helpful and she was kinda – not blowing it out of proportion, but she was just very – that's not what I needed in that moment, and it made it so much worse.—Allie

Yeah, but sending me to them [school counselors] – yeah, doesn't work. For me, it was like I would go find who I wanted to go talk to or I just wouldn't talk to them.—Coby

Yeah, in – was it elementary school? No, when I was in middle school, middle school had one, not to say that she's bad now that I'm looking back, but in the

moment I thought she was horrible because there was no confidentiality. I showed her that I was self-harming, and then she told my mom. Probably the worst thing you could possibly do for someone who's trying to survive their mom.—Izzy

Yeah. They told me I couldn't get scholarships 'cause my GPA wasn't high enough. I had a 3.8 GPA all through high school. I'm Hispanic, so they're not gonna give me any scholarships. I was like, okay. So that's the only time I had to meet with my actual counselors, and I'm like, "This sucks. What can we do?" The worst part was if it was just me in there with them, it wouldn't have been so bad. But my grandmother was in the room with me, and it was a bad ordeal for her.—Zach

No experience with school counselors. Four participants described not having any experiences with school counselors during their K-12 years. The participants with no experiences needed more information during the interview describing the role of a school counselor to answer the prompt.

I never went to a school counselor. I think – no, I don't think I ever went to a school counselor. I think when I started doing bad in school or I started acting out, in a typical high school, it was just reported to my caseworker. They never called me to their office. So no, didn't have experience with that.—Precious

Kindergarten through basically eight, we didn't have really school counselors.

I didn't really go see school counselors, you know, therapists and all that. As far as school counselors that I did go see were like deans and stuff, like if I already get in trouble.—Vanessa

Positive experience with school counselors. Two participants described the positive experiences with a school counselor during K-12. They spoke about particular traits of the school counselor as being particularly helpful, such as, being genuine, empathetic, and giving them space to talk on their own terms.

I think with her it was kind of mutual trust. I don't know if she – I don't know. For me it really worked because she would also vent to me, like I was her friend too, and that was really good for me because I actually felt like there was something mutual whereas in elementary school it was always, "How do you feel? Why are you cutting? Why are you acting out? How can I help you?" whereas it wasn't really a relationship, it was just a therapist, and that's not what I really needed. I

really needed someone to just cry with me, I guess. So she really helped. I got really lucky that I was assigned her because, you know, they're assigned A through J and J through whoever. I happened to get assigned her, so I was really lucky that I could trust her, yeah. And she was always there, like, she's at school, I was there all the time, so any time I needed her, I'd just drop by. Yeah, it's hard. It completely depended on the person. I just needed someone to be vulnerable as well 'cause when it's all one sided, it's hard.—Izzy

All through my K through 12 experience, my school counselors plays a really, really, really, really, really big role for me... he always had an open door for me. If things at home were really bad and I was overwhelmed, I could go sit in his office and do my schoolwork with him. If I was having a bad day and I just needed to take a break, there were no questions. There was never any expectation of me having to divulge into the things that were going on. I just had a place. He helped me get connected to my first therapist and being willing to do things like that...It was that counselor who helped me to be able to finish high school in my own way when I couldn't be in my school. I think my school counselors played a really large role in me being able to finish...I mean I think they played a big role in the sense that they supported me and didn't push me in any way that I wasn't ready to be pushed. They definitely gave me the autonomy. They never walked away...

Perceptions of the role of school counselor. Four participants with either no experience or negative experiences with school counselors referred to what they viewed as the role of a school counselor (e.g. school counselors are there for scheduling or sending transcripts).

So we didn't really have a counselor or whatever that I could go see or whatever unless I'm doing something terrible. If you just having a breakdown or whatever, you're kind of on your own.—Precious

I didn't have much interaction with counselors unless I got in trouble. I really hated talking to people back then.—Coby

And then throughout my high school, I was assigned an interventionist, which is just more like emotional side of counselors and stuff, 'cause in high school counselors are more for academics and schedules and stuff like that. So those counselors I would – just like normal kids, I would go and meet with them, maybe once or twice a semester, to either get a schedule change or to fix my schedule for the upcoming semester. That was about it.—Tristan

I didn't really have any. It was like they – it's funny because I always – it was very obvious that they picked the few that they believed in and not – you know,

disregarded the ones that didn't have potential because they were always like, "Oh, you have to have this GPA to get into this university."—Desiree

Impactful Connections

All participants endorsed this primary theme. The term impactful connections include both positive and negative personal connections with school personnel, child welfare personnel, foster parents, biological family members and peers. These connections stood out as particularly impactful in their journey to postsecondary education. Secondary themes include: bullying, foster care system outside of school, and in school connections, which impactful peer relationships and school staff. Descriptions of each secondary theme and supporting quotes are listed below.

Bullying. Five participants described their personal experiences with being bullied during their time in K-12 education. This secondary theme is different than the bullying that was described in the “school culture” secondary theme, in that it refers specifically to the youth’s experience with being bullied.

And with the bullying at the new school, it wasn't that bad, but, you know, people stare and make jokes and stuff like that, but once I started high school, and I was away from my parents, everything got better from there. Like it was so clear how much I needed to be taken away from them 'cause my success just shot up, like I was doing so well in school, I was making friends, and so much happier.—Izzy

Middle school was a little bit of a hard time for me. I got bullied in middle school. It was just kind of a sucky situation.—Zach

But I feel like there's a lot of ways where she contributed to bullying. And I remember this one time where this girl – I had bumped into her, and then she's like, "Oh, you're fat," and I'm like, "You're a jerk." And then I just called her that...And that was really hurtful then. And I guess if a teacher would've advocated for me more in fourth grade and worked with me instead of punishing me for things that were out of my control. Because – and that's what gets me is like the – things were so obvious and they were calling me names, so they noticed it. So – and it's like if you weren't so judgmental and you would rather just change your mindset and look at me as a person.—Desiree

High school was really rough for me. I was bullied. School was not a safe place for me. I worked a lot and I would get credit for working so that I wouldn't have to be there as much.—Jim

Foster care system outside of school. This secondary theme is in reference to individuals within the foster care system who had an impactful impact on the participant's K12 journey to postsecondary education. All participants endorsed this secondary theme.

I think that was the good thing about foster care is I got forced support, you know what I mean? So I feel like I always had someone there I could go to. Thank God my foster parents were always cool. I never had really a rough experience with foster care other than being in trouble or being teased or whatever. Other than that, my actual foster parents my experience was never bad, 'cause you can hear stories.—Precious

Even thinking about all the other professionals in my life, the ones that I've gotten close to, and the ones that do that, that don't just treat me as a case or a number, yeah, that'd definitely go for anyone like that. Like CASAs, for example, I always got really close with my CASAs because they actually spent the time to get to know me and it wasn't just "Okay, I have to see you once a month, let's get it over with"...I had a good team, and I was actually able to articulate words correctly and express my opinion. So whenever I said I wanted to move in with a friend, they took on the job of going there, asking them if they would be willing to take me in, and they were. But it's not like that for everyone.—Tristan

Her name was [X], and I met her when – it was a pretty rough part of my life, and they assigned her to my case. Because you have caseworkers, you have GALs, you have all these people who, like, tell you how to live your life or tell you where you're gonna live. But then they wanted somebody that kids could go to that's not a therapist, but they could go out to eat with, like a mentor kinda thing. So they assigned her to my case.... She actually believed in me, was what it came down to. She's like, "I didn't even read the paper they gave me about you, because I like to get to know kids and let them tell me what they wanna let me know."—Vanessa

In school. This secondary theme refers to the connectedness participant's experienced with peers and school personnel that were influential in their journey to postsecondary education. Five participants describe how these impactful people helped or hindered their K-12 experience. For example, some participants noted how some peer

relationships were not necessarily positive, but they were influential. This secondary theme does not include school counselors, as these interactions were described in a separate section.

My friends. I mean I would say teachers. I don't know. It was just kind of like – I feel like – also my case worker and everyone, they were all just kind of like, “Well, we wanna see you succeed. We wanna see you go to college,” and that was always nice to have that kind of support where they'd be like, “Oh, well, you gotta do this,” and I'd be like, “Okay, I gotta do this.”—Tristan

I had teachers to support me through anything I had. They understood what I was going through. When I went in, I tested really high into all the high groups – reading, writing. At the time, it wasn't math, but we got there, so it was very helpful. My fifth grade year, I had the opportunity – 'cause all the way coming up through basically – K through five is a lot of just kind of a female teacher demographic. Luckily, I had a male teacher, who was very – he helped me out a lot. He tried to give me some guidance and everything. It was awesome...He would just talk to me about life just sort of outside school, which was different. 'Cause I've never experienced a teacher that – where's this assignment? Let's learn this. Just sort of lecturing at you the whole time. It was different for him just to go out with us and shoot a basketball when we had an extra time for recess. Or just to talk to you like, "What's going on with his life and what we're gonna do."—Zach

Motivators

All participants endorsed this primary theme. The theme “motivators” includes the variety of things that motivated participants to earn a high school credential and seek postsecondary education. Participants often described being motivated in different ways simultaneously. For example, some participants described being internally driven to succeed in school and at the same time being motivated to have a different life than their biological parents or family members. Secondary themes in this section include: extrinsic, intrinsic, positive and negative messages from adults and peers, and school as an escape. Each secondary theme is described in detail below along with supporting participant quotes.

Extrinsic. Eight participants described wanting to be different [or to have a different outcome] than caregivers and family members. Some participants described not wanting the same outcomes that their parent faced as a result of not having an education. Others described being motivated by extended family member's success. Two of the participants are parents and described being motivated to finish a postsecondary degree to provide for their child.

I think that having that drive and motivation and desire to want to be there for those girls also really came from the fact that my extended family and my grandparents always did the same thing for me. That they never really made me feel like I had a choice but to go to school, which I think everybody needs.—Jim

I don't know if my grandma or grandpa went to college, but I know that my mom and dad did not, and so I'm a first generation. And somewhere in high school I was just looking back and I sort of – it's sort of bad to do, but I just was like, "Four of my family relatives did not go to college. Where are they at now?" One was in [another state], one was in prison, and then the other two passed. So I was like, "Do I really want" – not necessarily that exact situation, but do I want to be in a place where I have to ask people for money, a place to stay? And I knew that I can manage with no degree, but I also would rather have four years of fun, studying a topic I enjoy, and eventually putting that to a good career that can last a lifetime.—Coby

This is gonna sound crazy, but I think – realistically speaking, when I think about it, it would've been nice if I didn't have a kid right now, so I could focus on that. But I think since – I mean, it wasn't a planned pregnancy, so now that I have a son, I think that definitely is a motivator for me. So I think if I was just, like, free on my own right now, with no kids, no responsibilities, I probably wouldn't be in school right now, because I'd be like, "I can do whatever I want, I'm free," so kinda glad I had a kid to kinda, like, snap me like, "Okay."—Vanessa

Intrinsic. All participants endorsed this secondary theme. The intrinsic motivators participants described included the internal drive they have to succeed. For example, many participants described how there was never a question they would pursue higher education. Others described an internal drive to succeed.

I didn't know what else I would do. It just kind of felt like going to school was more an inherent thing than it was really a choice. Going to college, even though I

wasn't a strong student, it just never was a possibility for me not to go, even though I had no idea what I wanted to do or why I was doing it. It was just more of what you're supposed to do, or at least what you're supposed to try.—Jim

I don't know. It's never not been, "Oh, I'm not gonna go to college." It's always been, "I'm gonna go to college," and that's kinda like – I don't know. That's just kinda how my whole life played out.—Zach

It's a genuine mindset. Football helped a lot with that, too, because whenever I played football – it's just like – if you want to better yourself, you can, but you'll know by the end of the day whether you tried your hardest or whether you actually put in the work, whether you actually want to improve yourself or not. You could say that you did, but if you know that you didn't try your hardest, and you didn't, you didn't fully improve yourself to the max of your ability.—Tristan

I feel like what you just said, the self-motivation, I feel like that really stood out to me, 'cause my dad's told me that before too. He said that when he looks at me he sees that if there's something that I really want in my vision I'll go for it, and I believe that. I believe that I'm a really strong hard-headed person, and I think that – I believe that my attitude is very self-motivated. I think that's what really stands out to me is just the fact that there's a lot of people that can say "You can't do it" or "You won't do it" and if I want something, I'll do it, you know?—Precious

Positive and negative messages from adults and peers. This secondary theme refers to the way five participants experienced the various messages they received and internalized by the adults and peers in their lives, whether these messages were positive or negative, they motivated the participants to succeed academically. Positive and negative messages are included in the supporting quotes below.

I think a big part of it was that I had a lot of extended family who really prioritized education and higher education for me. Even when my immediate and home situation was really crazy and unstable, I always had my grandparents checking on me and letting me run away to them if I needed to. Always telling me I had to go to college.—Jim

It's kinda the message they sell to you when you go to school. "Hey, stay in school 'cause you basically need it to get anywhere." That was sort of my incentive, my mindset. If the school says I can do it, then I guess it's gotta be true. I was sold on the idea, and then I just went all in."... 'Cause as bad it is, I was told education was the way to go. You could always do something as long as you have an education. So I was like, "Well, let's try it."—Tristan

But I also had a lot of people backing me, and a lot of people don't have that. I didn't have it for a long time. But, you know, even one really close connection that just believes in you will get you really far or you have the opposite where no one believes you and you wanna prove them wrong which is also done with parents, case workers. Lots of people told me I can't, and I said, "Watch me," and I did it.—Izzy

Yeah, I would say it's that, like having my really high expectations and then also having people doubt me, and that just fuels my fire so much, especially people that should be supporting foster youth, that should be encouraging them, like, "Hey, keep this realistic, but also go for it," rather than, "There's no way that you're going to college without debt." "Well, I'm being paid to go to college, so thanks for trying to bring me down."—Coby

School as an escape. This secondary theme refers to participants who described finding solace in school. For example, one participant described school as the only normal or predictable part of their day. Others described leaving home behind to focus on school. Three participants endorsed this theme.

I love school. I think when I was angry it was kind of my scapegoat. I enjoyed going to school and really just focusing on school. Well, I finished my 12th grade in one semester. I finished high school in like two years.—Precious

I don't think so. Yeah, I really don't think any of them knew what was going on. I would really just get all of my homework done, because I'd want an excuse to stay out of my mom's house. So after school, since she wouldn't pick me up, I'd just go straight to a coffee shop and I'd stay there 'til it closed, and then I would go home and my mom would be asleep. So I would be studying for eight hours a day just doing that stuff.—Allie

Posttraumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth theory centers on the idea that growth can occur as a result of trauma, and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual's life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). It is strengths-based and focuses on the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma have the ability to recover and grow, under the right conditions. As previously described in Chapter II, the five factors of posttraumatic growth are: appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength, relating to others, and

spiritual growth. Not all participants experienced all five areas; however, all nine participants described personal strength. Personal strength was the most salient secondary theme in this study. The results will be tied specifically to posttraumatic growth literature in Chapter V; however, descriptions of the five factors of posttraumatic growth are presented with a description and supporting participant quotes below.

Appreciation of life. People who have experienced growth after a traumatic experience often describe having a changed sense of what is important in life. After surviving a trauma, they notice things that may have otherwise been taken for granted before the trauma. For example, a teenager might view going to school every day as a typical part of their lives, but a teenager who has survived a suicide attempt might view the simple act of attending school as a gift. Two participants endorsed this secondary theme.

I think that's another lens of it is that I was – it's very literally a miracle that I'm still alive, like I was supposed to die when I was 14, like there's no reason for my what happened to save me happened, and so sometimes I just feel like, yeah, I'm living a life that I shouldn't have, and so I'm trying to make the best of it the best I can 'cause I feel like I have a second chance.—Izzy

I think that, in a lot of ways, that helped me so that it wasn't such a new experience for me. Having that weird limbo of getting ready to finish high school and getting ready to go into college. That phase was really important for me because I got to start writing my new book. I didn't have to be this overly giving and always working and tired and trying to carry everybody else's hurt and what needs to be done anymore. It was okay for me to start figuring out what are boundaries? What does balance look like? Why is being healthy a good thing, and things like that. I think that being in more of an unstable place when I was younger in a lot of ways set me up to be able to make my own stability.—Jim

New possibilities. Five participants endorsed this secondary theme related to the new opportunities that are available to them in their lives after foster care. The idea of new possibilities is described as an individual's ability to respond to trauma by

developing new interests, and embark on new adventures or a new life trajectory. After the initial impact of the trauma, the individual may change the course of their life priorities or goals. For example, after a youth experienced foster care, may change course from their previous career goals and choose a career in a non-profit that serves youth in foster care.

I was just gonna say I'm just so happy it's over with. The past two years have been amazing, and it's just the beginning of healing too, like there's so much more healing to go through, and so much maturing and everything, and I'm just so excited for it, and it's just a great feeling.—Izzy

I think that that is a big part of why school became so important for me because it was a place for me to figure out who I wanted to be. I think that college for me was a new -- a lot of times you hear the metaphors of starting a new chapter in life. For me, being able to finish high school a semester early and to be working and going into school was my chance to be making a new book.—Jim

I think I want a job that will keep me on my toes and keep me interested, that will allow me to kind of move around and travel a little bit, and I'd love to be a caseworker.—Allie

Personal strength. Trauma survivors may experience an increased sense of their own internal strength and the capacity to survive and prevail after the trauma. As noted previously, personal strength is often referred to as resiliency; however, personal strength encompasses much more than being resilient from adverse experiences. Personal strength speaks to the individual's ability to experience growth despite trauma, and be stronger as a result. All participants endorsed this secondary theme.

So I personally took out the good from it. I personally took out the strengths throughout seeing the trauma and stuff rather than resorting to other coping skills, like drugs and stuff. I don't know. I set myself on idle for a long while whenever I was younger. And whenever I say "set myself on idle," I mean just kind of let anything happen, because, otherwise, I don't know – I just wouldn't be able to handle it if I wouldn't have done that. But out of it I took – I saw that I gained resiliency. I saw that I gained a lot of other stuff that are beneficial, and I liked looking at that rather than looking at all the bad. My mom was really good at – and is really good at – and likes talking about how she's sad and why things are so

bad, but I like talking about why things are good and pulling the good things out of even the worst. You know?—Tristan

Well, I'm proud of who I am. It took me a really long time to be -- to be confident and to be comfortable in my own skin. I know that a lot of that was because I was living with a lot of trauma and I was carrying a lot of weight and responsibility. I mean it made me stronger and it made me have a very clear understanding of what privilege is and has helped me to be really grateful and giving.—Jim

I mean it was really hard. I don't really know. I think that I definitely had a lot of trauma and I still see that show up in my life today. I don't think that I ever let it define me. I think that there certainly was a time where I lived in that trauma. I reacted in a lot of ways that people respond to trauma and live in the world. I didn't ever want that to be my life.—Desiree

So part of that's like 90 percent of my life has been horrible, and so I haven't had a childhood, and when I think about how everyone else has had that, like, I get jealous, but at the same time, I know that I wouldn't change it even if I could because I'm proud of who I am now, and I feel like I am much stronger for it, and I can live my life the way I want it now, but I definitely wouldn't go back and change anything.”—Izzy

I'm still gonna go back, depending on who and what wants to work with me, I will find a way because I believe that nobody – out of everything they can take, they can take my home, they can take my family, they can move me home to home, they do all that; they couldn't take my education.”—Zach

Well, I mean I think that it's important to be able to come up from something that's a little bit harder so that you can be more appreciative of what you have.—Coby

Relating to others. This secondary theme refers to the way in which participants felt connected to other people who have experienced similar adverse life events, such as foster care. In this study, five participants reported having a deeper understanding of other people who have experienced trauma, and in the context of foster care in particular. Participants who endorsed this secondary theme reported they felt the need to give back to other people in foster care and their peers who have experienced trauma.

I think that having those different childhood experiences, it's really good to be able to see the spectrum of people's lives and being able -- I think that growing up

with the circumstances and the environment I grew up in is why I have such empathy for a lot of people that are homeless and struggling to make it.—Precious

I think it's a really big reason why I do the work that I do is because I have been there. I want to be able to be a person who can say whether it's foster care or child abuse or substance abuse. Whatever hardship it is, it doesn't matter. You can overcome that and being able to be a support to other people is really special for me I guess.—Jim

And when given the chance, I want to be there to help people, and I think that's what I thrive off of the most is when I know that I'm being helpful.—Izzy

And I don't want you to think that I look at foster care as a bad thing, 'cause I don't. I hope that one day we won't need it. I know that's a far freakin' stretch, but I appreciate what it's done for me and where it's gotten me, 'cause I've met so many great people because of it. I've gone through so many different programs because of it and had – you know, I've gotten blessings that other people won't get because of it.—Precious

Spiritual change. While only one participant endorsed this secondary theme, her response was notable in relation to posttraumatic growth. Spiritual change refers to a trauma survivor's ability to make sense of their life after they experienced trauma. Precious described her journey to understand the purpose of the multitude of traumatic experiences she experienced in her life.

To be honest, I feel like I am a lot more mature than my age group. I don't say this to brag, but I say this humbly because of the simple fact that I've been through a lot more than a lot of people in my age group, and I feel like there was just something that God chose for me to do, and I feel like that was just something God – God chooses his strongest people to go through some of the toughest things. I'm about to cry, but –...I've lost so many memories, materialistic memories, pictures, actual stuff, and that – you know, what's crazy is a lot of people tell me foster care kids, whoever was in it or now or have gone thought it, they tend to hold onto a lot of things. They hold onto possessions. They hold onto memories. They hold onto a lot of things, and I've always been the type to hold onto stuff too, but I've also lost a lot that now I know like here on Earth there's not much that I can hold onto, but what I can hold onto is my education. I can hold onto my. I can hold onto my love. I can hold onto the things that are inside of me and the things that I believe.—Precious

Conclusion

Rigorous data analysis procedures yielded eight themes and 43 secondary themes, which were described in this chapter. Participant quotes illuminated themes to provide rich and thick descriptions to help readers understand these young peoples' experiences with trauma in relation to their journey to postsecondary education. Findings were organized into themes that described these experiences. These findings add to existing literature related to trauma, considerations of the impact of childhood trauma, trauma-informed school counseling literature, and trauma in relation to school counselor preparedness. In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings, and demonstrate how they fit within the greater context of existing literature.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of former foster youth with a history of trauma as it relates to their journey in reaching postsecondary education, their experiences and interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education, and the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth. The following chapter describes the outcomes of this study. First, I discuss the findings as they relate to the guiding research questions and previous literature. Each section of the findings includes discussion, as well as potential implications of the results. I also include practical implications for school counselors, school counselor educators, and foster care education stakeholders as relevant. Finally, I will explore the limitations of this study and future research considerations.

Discussion and Implications

In this section, I present discussion and implications of the themes that were presented in Chapter IV that reflect how former foster youth experienced trauma in relation to their journey to postsecondary education, experiences with school counselors, and growth despite trauma. First, I will list each research question and a brief overview of the findings related to each question. In the following sections, I will discuss how findings fit into the greater body of literature related to former foster youth who have a history of trauma and postsecondary education, the role of school counselors in

supporting children and youth in foster care, and growth despite trauma. I will also explore each of the themes and secondary themes in relation to the implications of the theme in terms of research and practice. Within each section, I will also present potential implications and recommendations for future research to the field of school counseling, school counselor education, and foster care education stakeholders. While findings were explained in Chapter IV, in this chapter I will contextualize the findings within the existing literature. The implications of this study are intended to inform and benefit the field of school counseling, school counselor education, and foster care stakeholders as relevant.

Research Questions

Research question one was: What are the experiences of former foster youth who have a history of trauma in reaching postsecondary education? The data suggest that former foster youth with a history of trauma experienced trauma by reacting to their home environments before and during foster care, their reaction to the people they encountered along the way both in and out of the foster care system, and the impact of these experiences on the youth academically and emotionally. The youth's journey to postsecondary education was shaped by the experiences youth had prior to being placed in foster care and during their time in foster care. Data indicates the impactful experiences youth described before and during foster care was a dichotomy of trauma and loving connections with family and peers. The range of these experiences shaped the overall journey in and out of school through their emotional reactions to events that happened before and during foster care.

Data also describe the impact these experiences had on the youth's academic performance and ability to learn. Former foster youth with a history of various types of trauma described encountering a multitude of relationships that were, at times, positive or negative. These connections and relationships with peers and adults in and out of school impacted the youth's motivation to complete a high school credential and pursue a postsecondary education. Each of the themes and secondary themes that emerged from the data will be discussed in later sections within this chapter.

The second research question was: How do former foster youth describe their experiences and interactions with school counselors during their time in K-12 education? One theme and four definitive secondary themes emerged related to this research question. The theme "what's a school counselor" was connected to the dichotomy of experiences youth had (or did not have) during their K-12 educational journey. Data related to this research question indicated a variety of experiences with school counselors that were either intensely positive or negative, or did not exist at all. Several of the participants described their perception of the role of a school counselor regardless of whether or not they had any interactions with school counselors. I will describe the implications of these experiences as they relate to the field of school counseling and school counselor education later in this chapter.

The third research question was: What is the lived experience of growth despite trauma for former foster youth? This research question can be best described through posttraumatic growth theory. Data in this study suggests all participants' experienced posttraumatic growth to some extent. The youths' lived experiences were described in

terms of the way in which trauma shaped their personalities and how their growth after trauma continues to have an impact on who they are today.

While the impact of trauma was difficult for the participants, they all described the way in which trauma has helped them grow and become more resilient. The five aspects of posttraumatic growth according to Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) include: appreciation of life, new possibilities, personal strength, relating to others, and spiritual change. Personal strength was the most salient theme related to this research question. Youth's experiences with growth despite trauma went far beyond coping with adversity in that data indicates youth experienced an increased sense of personal strength and an increased capacity to prevail despite trauma. In the following section, I will describe each aspect of the findings in relation to existing literature and implications for research and practice.

Trauma: The Journey to Postsecondary Education: Discussion and Implications

Within the home environment. The participants in this study faced a multitude of experiences prior to their involvement with the child welfare system and the removal from their families of origin. The findings in this study related to the home environment within the family of origin and circumstances associated with the youths' removal were somewhat consistent with national statistics related to removal. Nationally, the most common reason for removal from the home is due to neglect, which accounts for 61 percent (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Other common reasons for removal include parental drug abuse, physical abuse, and caretaker inability to cope;

all of which were experienced by the participants in this study (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

Consistent with literature, not all participants experienced physical or emotional abuse before they were removed from their families of origin. While abuse is a common reason for removal, it only accounts for 16 percent of young people removed from their homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). There is a common misperception that home removals and subsequent placement in foster care is a result of abuse, which is not the main reason for removal. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017) reported that the second most common reason for removal is parental substance abuse.

Trauma literature indicates that each person will have their own unique experience with trauma (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). In this study, an example of this is the way in which some participant's educational outcomes and experiences in foster care differed from their siblings. This indicates that two people in the same household with the same exposure to trauma may experience the trauma in different ways and have different reactions to trauma. Additionally, the separation from siblings and loss associated with splitting up family units is something that school counselors and foster care education stakeholders need to be aware of in their practice. The young people they are serving may be experiencing additional loss as a result of being separated from their families (Biehal, 2012).

School counselors should be aware of the signs associated with the other reasons for removal such as neglect, a caretaker's inability to cope, housing issues, parental incarceration, and parental substance abuse. Foster care education stakeholders could also

provide more training and facts to schools in order to ensure schools have a better understanding of signs a young person may be experiencing a lack of safety in the home. Schools and the child welfare system could address these challenges from a systemic approach in both identifying potential safety and wellbeing concerns in a home as well as the existing resources to support families (ASCA, 2018).

Within the foster care system. Consistent with the literature, youth in this study experienced high mobility in school and in their living environments before and during foster care. Youth in this study talked about the impact of not having control over their own lives and feeling as if they did not have a choice in where they lived or where they went to school. Although it is understood that taking youth wishes into account is important to mitigate risks of further traumatizing children and youth in foster care, this is not a common practice (Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Pecora, 2012).

Youth often struggle with being put in the position to explain their involvement with the foster care system, and are sensitive to being treated differently due to being in foster care (Tobolowsky, et al., 2017). Although youth do not want to be treated differently, they do often vacillate with wanting adults and peers to know they may have trauma-related responses in school but they do not necessarily want anyone to know the specifics about their trauma (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). School counselors need to be aware of these types of struggles youth experience in the foster care system. Having someone who is both an advocate and sensitive to unique needs of being in foster care can assist in easing transitions and navigating trauma in an educational setting (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Child welfare systems also need to give children and youth a choice in how they want school personnel and other adults in their lives about their

placement in foster care. The results in this study indicated youth felt disempowered when they were not given a choice as to who knew about their involvement and who did not, and giving the opportunity for youth to have choices can empower the youth to have autonomy over their own lives.

A common reason for youth not wanting peers and adults to know about their foster care status is due to the stigma associated with being in the foster care system (Villagrana, Guillen, Macedo, & Lee, 2018). It has been well documented that there is a stigma associated with being in foster care which is consistent with the findings in this study (Mampane & Ross, 2017). Tobolowsky, et al. (2017) suggest that practice implication includes providing training to all staff who interact with young people in foster care to reduce the feelings of stigma and assist them in their educational journeys.

An additional protective factor for students in foster care is the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities, as this creates additional opportunities to connect with peers outside of an academic environment (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016). School counselors have the opportunity to advocate for youth to have the same opportunities to engage in school as their non-foster peers. For example, school counselors in Colorado should be aware of the laws that requires schools to waive fees to participate in extracurricular activities and events such as sports or attending prom (C.R.S. 22-32-138). Child welfare agencies need to be sensitive to the disruption that foster care has on a child's social connections and opportunities to fully engage in school.

It is common for children and youth in foster care to experience multiple home placements within the foster care system in addition to school placements (Clemens et. al, 2018). The youth desired home placements that foster a sense of belonging, structure,

guidance and consistency, which they found in some homes and not in others and some schools and not in others. These findings are consistent with foster care literature in regards to the supports young people desire in foster homes (Affronti, Rittner, & Semanchin Jones, 2015; Storer, Barkan, Stenhouse, Eichenlaub, Mallillin, & Haggerty, 2014).

School mobility was a finding in this study and is consistent with foster care education literature (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014; Clemens, 2014; Clemens, et al., 2018; Clemens et al., 2017; Herbers, et al., 2013; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004). School mobility remains a problem despite the years of research that indicates students in foster care are impacted negatively by the frequent school moves they endure as a result of the system and the laws that have been put in place to protect students' rights to remain in their school of origin. Although the youth in this study persevered and earned a high school credential despite frequent school moves, it is still essential to address this problem systemically between schools and the child welfare system. School counselors can be supportive in these efforts by keeping informed of current laws regarding school stability for children and youth in foster care and advocate for their students to remain in their schools of origin whenever possible (ASCA, 2018).

Emotional impact. The findings in this study were consistent with previous literature regarding common emotional responses to experiencing trauma and foster care. For example, Bruska (2008) found that most, if not all, children and youth in foster care experience feelings of confusion, fear, loss, sadness, anxiety and stress. Similarly, these findings are consistent with this study as the majority of participants in this study. While the participants in this study indicated they moved past their trauma, they still have

lasting mental health effects at times. This finding is relevant to school counselors, counselors, and foster care stakeholders as they are in the position to normalize the emotional impact of trauma and connect them with continuing resources to support their mental health needs.

Professionals who work with children and youth in foster care need to be sensitive to the impact that changes in family and home settings may have on their identity. For example, sometimes young people are placed in foster care homes where the caregiver's race or ethnicity is different from their own. This change can cause the youth to experience a sense of loss due to the change. The majority of participants in this study noted a non-death loss and feeling isolated in that loss because others could not relate to that type of grief. These findings are consistent with a study by Mitchell (2017), which explored the disenfranchised grief young people in foster care experience. Recommendations from Mitchell's study include considering how child welfare agencies can be enhanced to meet the needs of youth grieving non-death losses in the foster care system. School counselors could also benefit from this approach in acknowledging non-death losses and disenfranchised grief for students in foster care.

Children and youth in foster care are often dealing with a multitude of traumatic experiences and loss (Mitchell, 2017). This can make it difficult to relate to trivial problems that their non-foster peers experience in their lives. The young people in this study were navigating the emotional and social impact of trauma in addition to engaging in school, and at times, the participants felt disconnected or jealous of the trivial problems experienced by their peers. Implications for school counselors and foster care education stakeholders as a whole include having a sensitivity and awareness. Participants in this

study stressed they did not want to be treated differently by peers or adults; however, they do want people to respect the insurmountable barriers they have had to overcome in relation to their peers.

Participants in this study indicated they experienced either depression, anxiety, suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts, or a general impact on their mental health as a result of their trauma and involvement in the foster care system. These findings are consistent with the foster care literature base. For example, Clemens et al. (2017) found that youth experienced similar emotional consequences as a result of foster care including depression and anxiety. Morton (2017) found that anxiety, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder were the most common diagnoses of former foster youth that entered postsecondary programs. The participants in Morton's study indicated these mental health challenges continued to manifest throughout their postsecondary programs. Participants in this study also noted the lasting impacts of mental health related issues that manifested in and out of school. It is essential for school counselors, clinical counselors, and child welfare stakeholders to be aware that foster youth are vulnerable to experiencing mental health challenges as a result of their trauma, both in the immediate aftermath of trauma and the lasting impact it can have on a child's life. Awareness, sensitivity, and the ability to connect the youth with resources that will best serve their needs could mitigate the severity of mental health related problems for children and youth in foster care.

Therapy is often a part of a foster youth's treatment plan created by child welfare professionals (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2018). Youth rarely have a say in who they see as a therapist, how often they attend therapy, and may be required to attend therapy whether

or not they want to attend (Mariscal, Akin, Lieberman, & Washington, 2015). Finding mental health interventions that youth feel are effective and helpful continues to be a challenge for the foster care system (Hambrick, Oppenheim-Weller, N'Zi, & Taussig (2016). Findings in this study were consistent with the literature base in regards to youth in foster care not having a choice in their therapist, type of therapy, or choice of therapeutic setting. Meta-analytic studies suggest that the ability for counselors to be deliberate in continually improving the therapeutic relationships for youth who have experienced trauma is a critical competency (Lenz, Haktanir, & Callender, 2017). School counselors could benefit from being informed about the lack of choices young people in foster care have in their lives and be sensitive to their needs. As reported in the results of this study, Jim described an effective school counselor as “someone who met her where she was at and did not push her in a way that she did not want to be pushed.” Her experience is consistent to the needs of youth in foster care who desire choice and autonomy over their therapy and their lives.

Experiencing the death of a parent is one way a child or youth may enter the foster care system. Helping students process grief is an essential skill for school counselors (ASCA, 2012; Eppler, 2008). The youth in this study did not express how any professional, including a school counselor, assisted in processing grief. Eppler (2008) found that assisting children with processing the loss of a parent through narrating and writing their stories about loss and adaptation was a successful practice for school counselors. Implications from this study suggest the importance of supporting youth through their grief, especially for young people in foster care who have experienced multiple traumas in addition to the loss of a parent.

Systems that promote trauma recovery need to be put in place in order to assist children and youth in the foster care system with the emotional impact of foster care and past trauma. For example, it may be clinically beneficial to conduct an evaluation of trauma symptoms regardless of whether there has been a documented history of trauma for children and youth in foster care (Rayburn, et al., 2016). This is especially important given that youth often experience trauma before, during, and after foster care placement (Riebschleger, et al., 2015). This study is consistent with previous foster care literature regarding the emotional impact of foster care, youth in foster care could benefit from earlier interventions, access to people who listen and care, and the opportunity to have a voice and choice in decisions that impact their lives (Riebschleger, et al., 2015).

Participants in this study indicated a lack of trust in adults and systems as a result of foster care. Additionally, some participants experienced a betrayal by peers and trusted adults before and during foster care. Zirkle, et al. (2001) suggest a lack of mistrust young people in foster care experience could be due to attachment disruption, which can lead to a lack of trust in others. The betrayal young people experienced by peers and trusted adults also impacted the youth's ability to trust in others. Over time, this trust and betrayal resulted in the youth disconnecting from peers and adults and impacted their ability to form relationships with others. Youth describe "the wall" as a metaphor for the way in which they protected themselves from experiencing further emotional trauma. School counselors and clinical counselors may have a difficult time establishing a therapeutic connection with youth in foster care based on the past experiences of the youth. Understanding the trauma and violation of trust children and youth have

experienced allows for professionals working with youth to approach them with a deeper sense of empathy.

Impact on learning. The participants in this study are among the small percentage of youth who earned a high school credential despite their trauma history and involvement in the foster care system. The findings in this study are consistent with previous studies regarding the impact of trauma on learning, and the importance of educators recognizing how trauma influences the educational experience (Fox & Berrick, 2007; Miller & Collins-Camargo, 2016; Nybell, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Riebschleger, et al., 2015). Although the youth in this study earned a high school credential, the majority of participants indicated foster care had an impact on their learning throughout their journey to postsecondary education, and some participants continue to experience learning difficulties in their postsecondary education programs. The school personnel, peers, and type of school setting they encountered throughout their K-12 education had an impact on their learning experiences. The school climate, trauma-informed environments and school personnel (or the lack thereof), and the type of school environment impacted students in various ways.

Academic impact. Changes in home and school placements as a result of foster care has been shown to an adverse impact on foster student's academic performance (Clemens et al., 2017). Young people in foster care could experience gaps in academic curriculum when they move from school to school. Some participants in this study felt as if school personnel did not care about their struggles or missed signs all together. For example, one participant was not diagnosed with a learning disability until she was in college and felt as if school professionals and professionals within the child welfare

system let her slip through the cracks. School counselors have the responsibility to advocate for academic and learning supports for students who are not performing at grade-level, and yet the results of this study do not indicate the extent to which school counselors provided these supports. Child welfare systems do not regularly inform schools, or school counselors, that a student is experiencing foster care. Without this knowledge, it is difficult for school counselors to know about the additional barriers students are experiencing in education. Another recommendation for school counselors is to review student's academic records as they enter school and note multiple school moves or potential gaps in curriculum. This would allow school counselors to be sensitive of the academic needs of a student who has experienced high mobility for any reason, including foster care.

State and Federal Legislation and Impact on Learning: Discussion and Implications

Okpych (2012) stresses the importance of policy reform to render postsecondary completion a viable and realistic expectation for youth in foster care. Without vital social, emotional, academic, and financial resources former foster youth are vulnerable to dropping out of their postsecondary degree programs (Montserrat & Casas, 2018). The youth in this study who were utilizing these programs reported that they were not having current academic struggles, while the three youth that did not have access to these supports and resources indicated the social, emotional, and financial burdens of school was a stressor for them. The emphasis of specialized services for youth as they exit the foster care system should focus on stability rather than self-sufficiency (Rome & Raskin, 2017). In this same vein, Unrau, Dawson, Hamilton, and Bennett (2017) concluded that

key components of college support programs should include financial aid, housing, and trained staff at universities to ease the transition to postsecondary education.

Motivators

Participants in this study spoke to their motivation to continue to pursue a high school credential and postsecondary education program despite the barriers they experienced along the way. Youth described being motivated in different ways at different times. The secondary themes of motivators to complete a high school credential and pursue a postsecondary degree include: extrinsic, intrinsic, positive and negative messages from adults and peers, and using school as an escape from trauma.

Types of motivation. Participants in this study described the desire and drive to have a different educational outcome than their parents. Some participants witnessed firsthand the struggles that their parents faced as a result of not obtaining a credential, while others were motivated by other family members earned high school and postsecondary credentials. Hass and Graydon (2009) found that youth who “beat the odds” attributed protective factors such as a sense of competence, goals for the future, and social support to keeping them engaged in school and pursuing a postsecondary degree. Youth in the current study indicated that they experienced both types of motivations in their journey to postsecondary education and their continuing education. School counselors could design intentional guidance curriculum and individual supports to students that assists them in identifying the internal and external elements of their motivation in school. Foster care education stakeholders could work together with schools to listen to the youth’s identified motivations and facilitate individualized support in their pursuit towards their goals.

Positive and negative messages from adults and peers. The youth in this study indicated they were driven to succeed through a multitude of messages they received from adults and peers throughout their journey to postsecondary education. For example, several participants reported being driven by positive and negative messages alike. Participants experienced different messages in various stages of their K-12 experience both in and out of school. These findings are consistent with Clemens et al. (2017) in regards to the way in which family members, school personnel, and peers told youth they believed in them or did not. The participants internalized these messages and used either the positive messages to keep going or the negative messages to prove people wrong with their success. School counselors, clinical counselors, and foster care education stakeholders should be careful with the words they use with young people in foster care. Foster youth know when people are being genuine and when they are not (Riebschleger, et al., 2015). Having unconditional positive regard for students despite their grade point average, school performance or past behavior assists in making impactful connections with all students, and especially students in foster care.

School as an escape. It is possible that school is the only predictable and safe part of a foster youth's day. In this study, school and academics was a way for the youth to focus on something other than what happened to them before foster care and during their experience in foster care. For some, they found ways to stay at school longer to avoid going home to chaos and unpredictability. School counselors could use this knowledge to be intentional with a student in foster care in assisting them to have opportunities to participate in both in school and out of school activities. Foster care education stakeholders could collaborate with schools to support involvement in these opportunities

and remove any barriers to participation. For example, if transportation is a barrier for the youth to participate in an after school program, the child welfare agency and school could come together to arrange and pay for transportation to remove that barrier.

Type of school environment. Young people in foster care are often placed in residential treatment facilities to process their trauma (Portwood, Boyd, Nelson, Murdock, Hamilton, & Miller, 2018). While there is limited research on the educational experiences of children and youth in foster care in residential treatment facilities, the findings in this study were consistent with the literature. Youth in other studies cited similar experiences in relation to a mismatch between their educational needs and services provided (Day, Baroni, Somers, Shier, Zammit, Crosby,... & Hong, 2017). One participant in this study attributed the lack of credits she earned through the residential treatment school system put her so far behind that it would not be possible for her to earn a high school diploma by the age of 21, which forced her to get a GED. This finding is consistent with foster care literature as youth the educational settings and behavioral or psychological issues often result in students either dropping out or having no other option than earning a GED (Pecora, et al., 2009).

Professionals who work with foster youth, especially school counselors, should be aware of the options available to foster students in order to advocate for high school credit attainment and accrual. For example, Colorado has a state law, C.R.S. 22-32-138, which allows school districts to provide foster youth with the opportunity to demonstrate competency in a subject if they are lacking credits as a result of multiple school moves. It is important for school counselors to be aware of these types of educational protections to assist youth in educational planning by being aware of all of their options and rights.

School climate. The participants in this study experienced various school climates during their multiple school moves. The culture of the school, socioeconomic status of the students, and norms within the school influenced their experiences within the school environment. For example, a high socioeconomic status of a school often correlated with a lack of diversity and the youth perceived the staff as oblivious to the needs of students who experienced economic hardship or students in foster care. On the other end of the spectrum, the youth also experienced schools with high turnover in school leadership and staff, which made it even more difficult for youth to form impactful relationships with the staff. The socioeconomic status of a school often predicts the retention of school staff, and school counselors working in lower income schools experience higher burnout than those who work in wealthier school buildings and districts (Holman, Watts, Robles-Pina, & Grubbs, 2018). Being aware of this risk may assist in schools and school counselors to design educational programs that meet the needs of the students and the staff.

Trauma-informed schools and people. Creating an environment where traumatized children feel safe, connected, and have access, to impactful and healthy relationships is key in recovery (Herman, 1997; Perry, 2006, 2009; Pianta, 1999; Osher, 2002; Wolpow, et al., 2009). Purtle and Lewis (2017) found that a lack of access to trauma-informed school environments has resulted in traumatized students experiencing re-traumatization. The youth in this study spoke specifically to times where they were re-traumatized in school as a result of a lack of trauma sensitivity by school personnel, including school counselors. One evidenced-based approach to trauma-informed systems is SAMHSA's Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach (2014).

SAMHSA's Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach. One aspect of the trauma-informed school counseling movement involves following SAMSHA's Six Key Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach. In 2014, SAMHSA developed these core principles in order to develop a shared understanding of trauma and a trauma-informed approach across an array of service systems and stakeholder groups such as child welfare, education, criminal and juvenile justice systems (SAMSHA, 2014). Youth in foster care are often involved in these multiple systems at once, making the SAMHSA approach to trauma-informed care an ideal approach (Biehal, 2012; Bobbitt & Gershoff, 2016; Vasileva & Petermann, 2016). SAMHSA's principles are easily adapted in a school setting and are able to work with a variety of existing programs within schools. For these reasons, SAMSHA's approach serves as a foundation for the discussion of participants' experiences in the school system.

It is essential for school counselors to continue to receive professional development about trauma-informed systems and schools in order to facilitate a safe learning environment for all students, and especially for children and youth in foster care. The advances in trauma-informed care provides an opportunity for school counselors to advocate for the implementation of evidenced-based programs that support all students (Kenny, et al., 2017). While the SAMHSA approach is not the only evidenced-based option to approach trauma-informed schools and systems, it is not the only option. It is important for school counselors to advocate for trauma-informed approaches to their counseling practices and school systems as a whole.

Impactful Connections

As previously mentioned in Chapter II, the foundation of this study is rooted in the assumptions of constructionism in that subjective meaning is constructed by human beings as they engage with the world and people in it (Crotty, 1998). The term “impactful relationships” in the results of this study refers to the meaning participants constructed as a result of their social worlds, and these meanings were not always necessarily positive. For example, a salient theme in this study was bullying and other relationships that the youth described as unsupportive or unhealthy. The following section will address elements of impactful relationships the youth described in this study and the supporting literature as well as implications for the school counseling field and foster care education stakeholders.

Herbers, Reynolds and Chen (2013) found that peer relationships during middle and high school play a significant role in the development of identity and self-esteem. Adverse experiences with peers and staff are often a factor in the negative academic outcomes experienced by foster youth (Benbenishty, et al., 2017). Bullying and the overall negative climate of some schools the youth attended were a salient sub-theme in this study, which is an important finding given that social capital and supportive relationships are essential for children and youth in foster care (Coleman, 1988; Agneessens, et al., 2006; Bell & Romano, 2015).

Supportive relationships have been shown to be a key protective factor during K-12 education and in higher education for students in foster care (Biehal, 2012; Day, Riebschleger, Dworsky, Damashek, & Fogarty, 2012; Dill, et al., 2012). Having consistent and relationships with adults who are committed to providing options, opportunities, skills and confidence in young people is especially challenging for high

school aged youth in foster care (Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, & Powers, 2012). The findings in this study were consistent with this study and other studies that stress the importance of supportive and healing relationships with adults and peers (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2016; Riggs, Augoustinos, & Delfabbro, 2009; Storer et al., 2014).

From a neurobiological standpoint, Perry (2006, 2009) asserted that social health was essential for trauma recovery for adolescents placed in foster care. The findings in this study were consistent with Perry's findings regarding strong and supportive ties as a predictor for trauma recovery. While the many of the youth in this study still have lasting effects of trauma, all participants indicated that social ties with peers and trusted adults were essential in their trauma recovery during their K-12 education. Additionally, the majority of participants indicated that social connectedness continues to be a protective factor for them currently as they navigate their postsecondary education programs. School counselors and foster care education stakeholders could further assist young people in foster care with facilitating connections with peers, teachers, school personnel, and extracurricular activities in school. These intentional connections could result in impactful connections with peers and provide an opportunity to find trusted adult relationships.

What's a School Counselor?: Discussion and implications

The American School Counselor Association released a position statement that was adopted in 2018 regarding the school counselor and supporting students in foster care. According to ASCA, "School counselors serve as the liaison between their school

and child welfare agencies to promote communication and collaboration to address students' educational needs in their specific communities and improve students' educational outcomes (ASCA, 2018, p. 82). Specifically, ASCA asserts that it is the role of the school counselor to, "help foster students with a stable school environment, bridge communication between schools during times of transitions, promote resilience and identify protective factors, collaborate with foster/biological family and community stakeholders (e.g., social workers, therapists, attorneys and case managers), display awareness of the challenges students face, and inform themselves of resources available to help students access postsecondary training opportunities (e.g., current scholarships, grants and application fee waiver programs available to foster youth in their states)" (ASCA, 2018, p. 82). The findings in this study were consistent with the urgent need for school counselors to assist in this underserved and often over-looked student population. Ideally, foster care stakeholders and school counselors would work together on behalf of children and youth in foster care through a trauma-sensitive approach, but the findings in the literature indicate this is not happening on a regular basis (Bass, 2017; Forkey et al., 2016; Forkey, et al., 2016).

Hudson (2013) found that mentoring programs that were focused on career mentoring programs were important to youth in foster care and are not always available through the child welfare system. This is not consistent with the findings in this study as the majority of participants indicated they received postsecondary and career planning from programs arranged through the child welfare system. It is important for school counselors to make these connections with child welfare in order to refrain from

duplicating efforts and building stronger support systems for youth in foster care to have access to academic, postsecondary, and career planning (Rowley, 2017).

School counselors can play an integral role in reducing the academic achievement gap for historically underserved students (Siegfried, et al., 2004; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Child welfare and school counselor connections could also assist in reducing the academic gaps that are often associated with multiple school moves (Clemens, Sheesley, & Lalonde, 2016; Clemens et al., 2017). Given that foster students have the largest educational achievement gap than any other student population, it is essential for the child welfare system and schools to work collaboratively on behalf of the students. The youth in this study were often put in the position to advocate for themselves and had a difficult time navigating multiple systems to be able to earn a high school credential and access a postsecondary education program. Youth in foster care should not be put in the position to have the additional burden of piecing together systems that are intended to support them, especially since intentional counselor-student connections could make a difference for youth emotionally, socially, and academically (Petrenko, et al., 2011; Rome & Raskin, 2017; Rowley, 2017). Therefore, findings in this study indicate that there is still a need for child welfare and school systems to enact systemic changes on behalf of children and youth in the foster care system. This is especially essential for school counselors as children and youth in foster care are often placed in school environments that result in re-traumatization (Purtle & Lewis, 2017). Future school counselors are already trained in developing comprehensive school counselor programs that serve all students, and recent literature presented in this study and this study itself speaks to the continuing need for trauma-informed training.

School counselor educators can also benefit from the results of this study and recent position taken by ASCA in designing curriculum that will adequately prepare future school counselors to address the social, emotional, career, and educational needs for children and youth in foster care. The field of school counseling could also benefit by updating CACREP standards to reflect specific competencies that will prepare counselors to address topics such as crises, disaster, or other trauma-causing events.

Negative experiences with school counselors. Consistent with Williams and Portman (2014) noted several recommendations that foster youth had for school counselors to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care, one of which was inclusion in educational decision making. Participants in this study who had negative experiences with school counselors noted feelings of powerlessness in decision making. Developing trust between a student in foster care and school counselor may be challenging given their vulnerability to past interactions with adults (Riggs, et al., 2009).

Along the same lines of feeling powerless, some participants in this study reported being forced to go to their school counselor. For some, the interaction with the school counselor appeared to be punitive in nature, which did not help in establishing a trusting connection. School counselors are often tasked with duties outside of the role of school counselor as defined by ASCA (Chandler, Burnham, Riechel, Dahir, Stone, Oliver,...& Bledsoe, 2018). Additionally, school counselors often have large caseloads which leaves them limited time to devote to individual students (Holman, et al., 2018). If this is the case, school counselors could benefit by recognizing the power differential with the student, and be intentional in establishing trust before addressing the purpose of the visit with the student. For example, if the school counselor is meeting with a student

at the request of a concerned teacher, the counselor could start with getting to know the student and helping them feel comfortable before addressing the concern. Although this may be a challenge due to the many demands on school counselor's time (Chandler et.al, 2018), it could make a difference in connecting with a young person who has past trauma or a lack of trust in adults.

School counselors are required to report suspicion of child abuse or if a student is a potential harm to self or others (ASCA, 2016). Some youth in this study indicated they had a negative interaction with their school counselor because they reported a self-harm and suicidal thoughts to their abusers. This is an ethically challenging aspect of school counseling. While school counselors will continue to be required to report safety issues, youth should be included to the extent it is appropriate and given choices of how this happens and with whom. For example, if a youth is self-harming the school counselor could ask the youth which legal caregiver they want them to support them at home and how they would like to include them (e.g., having the school counselor call the legal caregiver while the student is in the room, or arrange for an in person meeting, etc.). School counselors could also ask additional questions about their support systems outside of school prior to bringing up mandatory reporting. This could assist the counselor in finding out the student's established connections and this could also give the student a chance to indicate whether or not they feel safe at home.

No experience with school counselors. Some participants in this study indicated they had no experience with a school counselor. For some, I had to explain what I meant about a school counselor. When I used the term "guidance counselor", the youth had an understanding of what I meant by "school counselor". This finding indicates the

continued need for school counselors to advocate for their profession and educate the public about the role of a school counselor. This is not a new problem in the field of school counseling, as professional school counselors have been trying to move away from the term “guidance counselor” for nearly two decades.

As noted in Chapter II, high school counselors are in the position to support foster youth in this transition to postsecondary education programs. Even the youth with positive experiences with school counselors did not speak specifically to the postsecondary supports their school counselor provided; however, the majority of youth spoke to supports and systems within the foster care that supported their transition to higher education. School counselors have an opportunity to connect with child welfare programs that support transition to higher education in order to work collaboratively on behalf of the youth. This collaboration could provide an opportunity for school counselors to share their expertise with professionals in the child welfare system who may not have as much experience or expertise in assisting students with postsecondary and career planning.

Another common role of a school counselor is to support students with disabilities in their education (Foley-Nicpon & Assouline, 2015). Green and Mathiesen (2017) posit that school counselors in particular could play an important role in supporting foster youth with disabilities through advocacy and cultural competency. For the youth with no experiences with a school counselor, this study did not yield results to indicate the school counselor’s involvement in support in their journey to postsecondary education or support in navigating being a student with a disability. What is clear through these results

is school counselors have a continued need to advocate and educate school buildings and the general public about the role of a school counselor.

Positive experiences with school counselors. As noted in Chapter II, effective school counseling practices include being able to take into account the child's entire system and recognizing where a problem originates (Amatea & Clark, 2005; Brown, et al., 2006; Ingersoll & Bauer, 2004). The youth who experienced positive interactions with school counselors indicated the school counselor met them where they were, and sought to understand them as a whole person. Autonomy and access to a safe place within the school building was also a finding in the youth's experiences with school counselors, which is consistent with non-school counseling literature as well. For example, Hass, Allen and Amoah (2014) found that youth who reached at least a junior standing at a four-year postsecondary institution suggested that autonomy, social and instrumental support, and access to "safe havens" were a turning point in their journey to postsecondary education.

Consistent with Rios and Rocco (2014), school counselors made a significant difference in the lives of the youth who experienced positive interactions with their school counselors in this study. The three participants in this study that endorsed this theme indicated that the school counselor went above and beyond to address their needs and sought to understand them. Geroski (2000) suggests that school counselors have the opportunity to play a critical role in orchestrating a circle of support around children and youth in foster care. For the participants in this study who did have positive interactions with school counselors, their relationship was invaluable in supporting them emotionally and in their pursuit of a high school credential and postsecondary education. School

counselors have an opportunity to model a healthy, empathetic relationship for foster care youth because of their specific training in relationship building (Moss, et al., 2017). For the individuals in this study who did have positive relationships with school counselors, these relationships made a lasting difference in their journey to postsecondary education.

Perception of the role of a school counselor. School counselors have spent years separating the idea of a “guidance counselor” from “school counselor” (Gibson, Dollarhide, Conley, & Lowe, 2018). The subtle nuance in wording speaks to the evolution of the role of a school counselor from the limited role of guiding students in their pursuit to college and sending transcripts to a comprehensive school counseling program that encompasses much more (Kleinman, 2018). Some of the participants with no experience with a school counselor perceived the role of a school counselor to send transcripts or change schedules. These are common misperceptions and the results of this study are consistent with school counseling literature regarding the continuous need to effectively communicate the role of a school counselor to their stakeholders (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

In addition to the overall role of a school counselor, the findings in this study stressed the need for school counselors to continue to be educated about social justice advocacy in their practice. Feldwisch and Whiston (2016) found an alignment between school counselors’ self-endorsement of social justice advocacy and scores on advocacy competency measures, especially for school counselors working in recognized ASCA Model Programs. Findings in this study support the importance of advocacy for the profession in order for students to receive services from school counselors.

Posttraumatic Growth: Discussion and Implications

This study addressed an underrepresentation of youth voice in foster care education literature and the gap in the literature related to the growth youth experienced despite trauma. There was nothing inherently different about the experiences the youth described in this study as compared to the literature about former foster youth who did not earn a high school credential (Clemens et al., 2016; Clemens et al., 2017; Morton, 2017). Their stories of surviving trauma and thriving regardless of the barriers they encountered along the way by people in their lives or systems themselves.

As Masten, Herbers, Cutuli, and Lafavor (2008) noted, viewing trauma through a strengths-based lens allows for the idea that all of the outcomes an individual may experience as a result of trauma may not necessarily be negative. The participants in this study described the way in which trauma shaped who they are as a person today and ways in which their past trauma has made current challenges in their lives easier to face. Youth in this study did not simply survive their trauma; they prevailed over the trauma and used their experiences to learn and grow.

Child welfare professionals, school counselors, and counselors could benefit from viewing trauma through a strengths-based lens in their work with foster youth. Accounting for the possibility that one may experience growth despite trauma does not negate the difficulty one may experience in recovering from trauma, and professionals working with children and youth in foster care continue to take into account the negative impact trauma may have on a child's life; however, it is equally important for professionals to understand that trauma and involvement in foster care is not the end of the story. For example, Harwick, et al. (2017) found that resilience, personal strength, advocacy, and self-determination were essential to foster youth overcoming barriers they

experienced in foster care. Although this study was unrelated to posttraumatic growth specifically, similar findings were presented in this study.

Continuing to find ways in which school counselors, counselors, and foster care stakeholders can promote environments that assist youth in tapping into their own personal strength could provide essential systemic supports for children and youth in foster care. Consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995), participants in this study were able to draw from their strength, their new-found appreciation of life, the new world that is open to them after foster care, support and connection to others, and the meaning they made from their experiences to grow despite the trauma they experienced.

The individuals in this study did not experience this growth in isolation, which indicates the need for professionals working with foster youth to listen to the youth's experience, support them in their journey, and believe they are capable of resilience and growth. Every participant in this study had someone who believed in them. Whether it was a caseworker, a school counselor, a teacher, a foster parent, or a mentor; they had someone who recognized their potential and saw their strengths regardless of the trauma they experienced. Every adult should be ready to be "the one" for the young people, which happens through empathy, openness, understanding, and acceptance.

Summary of Findings

I chose to include the term, "nevertheless they persisted" after my initial review of the all participant's transcripts. The participants all faced insurmountable odds and trauma during their childhood. The foster care and trauma literature bases overwhelmingly refer to the negative impact trauma could have on a child's life and future (Bassuk & Friedman, 2005; Fritz, 2017; Goldson, 2002; Siegfried, et al., 2004).

The youth in this study did not indicate any experience that was vastly different from any of the circumstances often associated with adverse educational and social outcomes, and yet, nevertheless they persisted. The participants in this study persisted and grew despite their circumstances. They persisted when some people in their lives did not believe in them, and they continue to persist today.

School counselor and counselor educators, child welfare systems, and broader foster care education stakeholders could use this study to recognize the possibility that a young person can grow despite trauma. As ASCA (2018) wrote, “School counselors recognize students in the foster care system are resilient, have many strengths and may require additional support in obtaining resources, social/emotional care, academic planning and college/career guidance (p. 82).” School counselors should also advocate for promoting evidenced-based practices in trauma-informed schools and environments. The results in this study yielded results that indicated the importance of having such environments and people to ease the impact of experiencing trauma in a K-12 environment.

School counselors cannot complete these tasks in isolation. It is essential for child welfare agencies to ensure schools, and school counselors in particular, know which students are in foster care to be able to provide these supports. Without this knowledge, children and youth in foster care are hiding in plain sight and may be overlooked. Federal school stability laws are relatively new (ESSA, 2015). The systems and professionals that serve young people in foster care have the opportunity and charge to work together on behalf of the child in order to improve the educational experience of children and youth in foster care and improve educational outcomes.

Limitations

Though rigorous methodological and analytical procedures were utilized throughout the conception and completion of this study, it had several limitations. In this section, I will present each of the limitations to this study. The limitations in this study include: limitations of participant demographics, the lack of multiple interviews, additional information about school counselors, programs, and training.

Limitations of Participant Demographics

There was an overrepresentation of participants who were enrolled in, or completed, a degree at a large four-year university. Only one participant was enrolled in a community college, and two participants were enrolled in a certificate program. While the results did not appear to be different regardless of the type of postsecondary program, having a more diverse sample in terms of type of postsecondary program would have been ideal. Additionally, this small sample of youth had a diverse representation of racial, ethnic, and gender; however, there was an overrepresentation of females and nearly half of participants were white. The participant demographics were relatively consistent with the overall demographics of youth in the foster care system in Colorado, which is comprised of students who are 44 percent white, 37 percent Hispanic/Latinx, and 12 percent Black/African American. There were three participants who identified as male, which is underrepresented from the 55 percent of foster students who are male in Colorado (Colorado Department of Education, 2016).

Multiple Interviews

As noted in Chapter I, I anticipated having difficulty with arranging multiple interviews with this population. First, the population of former foster youth in

postsecondary programs is limited due to the low high school credential completion rate and the low matriculation rates. Former foster youth who are in college typically have to balance work and school, transportation issues and busy schedules, which results in limited free time (Clark, 2009). Multiple interviews would have been ideal in order to give participants time to process their responses and experiences; however, it was not practical for this study.

Additional Information About School Counselors, Programs, and Training

The youth talked about their experiences with school counselors, but did not talk about systemic aspects of the school counseling program or school approaches to reducing the achievement gap. ASCA (2012) suggests school counselors provide a guidance curriculum that addresses all student needs, including closing-the-gap activities that align with school goals. The youth in this study did not speak to any guidance curriculum or ways in which the school goals supported the reduction in achievement gap regardless of the type of experience the youth had with the school counselor. The participants in this study spoke to how they perceived school counselors and not the systemic programs that existed in this school. Therefore, this study did not provide in-depth information about the school counselors or school counseling programs in relation to how they support students.

School counselors understanding of federal and state foster care education laws. As previously noted in Chapter II, it is important for school counselors to have an understanding of the laws that are aimed to decrease the educational achievement for children and youth in foster care, such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

Despite the federal and state laws that are intended to increase school stability, the youth in this study described mobility during their K-12 education. This study was dependent on the youths' perception of their educational experiences, and because of this, it was not possible to know what, if any, attempts were made to keep the youth in their school of origin. This study does not provide sufficient information about how youth were impacted by school stability laws or the school counselor's knowledge of such laws.

School counselor's training and knowledge of trauma. The results of this study do not provide information about the school counselor's training or knowledge of trauma. Youth who experienced positive interactions with school counselors spoke to trauma-informed characteristics the school counselor exhibited, but could not provide information on the school counselor's education or training in trauma. School counselors are becoming increasingly charged with understanding how trauma impacts human development and using this knowledge to advocate for a trauma-informed environment (Taylor, 2017). The data in this study did not provide an insight to the type of knowledge or training school counselors had about trauma or creating a trauma-informed environment.

The role of the school and school counselors in posttraumatic growth. One participant attributed some of her growth to school counselors who helped her navigate a difficult school environment. Some participants described instances where school personnel and school counselors supported them in particular, but the results did not provide sufficient information on the role the school system as a whole or what role the school counselor played in posttraumatic growth. Participants described posttraumatic growth that they drew from their own internal strength, and while school systems may

have helped, it is not clear as to whether or not they had a specific impact on the youth experiencing posttraumatic growth.

Future research

School Counseling Profession

Future research could include the school counselor perspective in working with children and youth in foster care. Additionally, future research could also include the way in which the school counselor and school counseling program addresses systemic change for vulnerable student populations as a whole to reduce the academic achievement gap. For example, in alignment with ASCA (2012), how are school counselors collecting, analyzing, and interpreting relevant student data in order to improve student behavior and achievement.

As noted in the limitation section, this study did not provide data to indicate the school counselor's background in trauma training in their counselor education programs or any subsequent training. Future research could be conducted to expand the work of Minton and Pease-Carter (2011) that found counselor education programs do not fully prepare future counselors for the crises they will encounter in the field. Similarly, Courtois and Gold (2009) found that a disparity exists in the counselor profession as a whole to address psychological trauma in the field. School counselor preparedness to recognize and understand symptoms of trauma and adequate training in supporting these students is not represented in current literature. School counselor literature indicates that school counselors will become increasingly expected to identify and work with children with a history of trauma (Martin, et al., 2017). With an increase in focus on trauma-informed training for educators as a whole, it is essential to understand the extent to

which school counselors feel prepared to create trauma-informed school counseling programs (Finkelhor, et al., 2015).

Integrating Child Welfare and School Systems

As mentioned in the limitations section, it was not possible to know the school counselors understanding of the child welfare system or related educational laws due to the methodology used in this study. Future research could survey school counselors to determine their understanding of the systems and laws that are intended to assist in reducing the academic achievement gap for children and youth in foster care. The extent to which school counselors have an understanding of the child welfare system, related foster care education laws, an integration of child welfare into the school system is unknown.

Many of the systems that are designed to support youth in foster care in their journey and transition to postsecondary education exist outside of the school system. For example, Coby noted that his school counselors told him about scholarship opportunities, but he was already receiving one-on-one support through an outside agency through the child welfare system. Now that schools and child welfare agencies have official partnerships through laws federal and state laws (ESSA, 2015; C.R.S. 22-32-138, 2018), there is an opportunity for schools and child welfare to design intentional programming to fully support youth in foster care. Stone, et al. (2006) described schools as a neutral place to connect stakeholders involved in a foster youth's life, and yet there is not sufficient research to indicate the extent to which these partnerships are occurring. Some of the participants in this study indicated these efforts were being duplicated in schools and child welfare systems, and there is an opportunity to research whether or not

coordinated efforts make a difference in educational outcomes and transition to postsecondary education programs. Additionally, participants in this study noted several programs that were executed through the child welfare system, yet the youth did not speak to how these systems were integrated within the school system. A study to determine the extent to which schools interact with child welfare systems in order provide support for foster youth in and out of school could be beneficial to school counselors and foster care education stakeholders.

Residential treatment facilities. Some participants spoke about their experiences of attending school in residential treatment facilities. School programs within residential treatment facilities are not traditional K-12 education systems as the focus is primarily on attending to the emotional needs of the students (Chen, Culhane, Metraux, Park, Venable, & Burnett, 2016). Youth in this study indicated they experienced a subpar education in these facilities and struggled with transferring to a traditional K-12 school curriculum.

There is a gap in the literature in this area. The mobility rate in Colorado for students in foster care between K-12 schools and residential treatment facilities is currently unknown. The small sample of youth in this study indicated that transferring to and from these facilities significantly impacted their learning and ability to have a “normal” childhood. Additionally, it is unknown what types of school counseling support these students are receiving.

Conclusion

Through a phenomenological exploration of the experiences of nine youth former foster youth who have a history of trauma provided a rich and thick description of their journey from K-12 to postsecondary education, the role that school counselors did (or did

not) play in their journey, and growth despite trauma. Themes that emerged from this study were related to: participants' experiences prior to being placed in foster care; emotional experiences and reactions participants encountered throughout their K12 journey; the impact that trauma and experiences within the foster care system had on learning; participants' experiences within the foster care system; impactful connections participants made in their journey to postsecondary education; participants' experiences and view of school counselors; factors that impacted motivation to complete a high school credential and pursue a postsecondary education; and participant's experiences with posttraumatic growth. Limitations and areas for future research have been considered and discussed in this dissertation. This study presents commonalties within the discussion of the themes and implications for school counselors, counselor educators, child welfare systems, and foster care stakeholders. The research provides an insight into the struggles and challenges of the participants and offers foster care stakeholders an opportunity to examine how their interaction with foster care youth might be viewed through their eyes.

REFERENCES

- Affronti, M., Rittner, B., & Semanchin Jones, A. M. (2015). Functional adaptation to foster care: Foster care alumni speak out. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 9*(1), 1-21.
- Agneessens, F., Waeye, H., & Lievens, J. (2006). Diversity in social support by role relations: A typology. *Social networks, 28*(4), 427-441.
- Ahrens, K. R., DuBois, D. L., Richardson, L. P., Fan, M. Y., & Lozano, P. (2008). Youth in foster care with adult mentors during adolescence have improved adult outcomes. *Pediatrics, 121*(2), e246-e252.
- Akos, P., & Galassi, J. P. (2004). Middle and high school transitions as viewed by students, parents, and teachers. *Professional School Counseling, 7*(4), 212-221.
- Amatea, E., & Clark, M. (2005). Changing schools, changing counselors: A qualitative study of school administrators' conceptions of the school counselor role. *Professional School Counseling, 9*(1), 16-27.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5®)*. American Psychiatric Pub.
- American School Counselor Association. (2012). *ASCA national model: A framework for school counseling programs*. American School Counselor Association.

- Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C. H., Perry, B. D., ... & Giles, W. H. (2006). The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. *European archives of psychiatry and clinical neuroscience*, 256(3), 174-186.
- Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2014). *Sustaining momentum: Improving educational stability for young people in foster care*. Retrieved from <http://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-SustainingMomentum-2014.pdf>
- Auslander, W., McGinnis, H., Tlappek, S., Smith, P., Foster, A., Edmond, T., & Dunn, J. (2017). Adaptation and implementation of a trauma-focused cognitive behavioral intervention for girls in child welfare. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 87(3), 206.
- Barrat, V. X., & Berliner, B. (2013). The invisible achievement gap: Education outcomes of students in foster care in California's public schools.
- Barrett-Kruse, C., Martinez, E., & Carll, N. (1998). Beyond reporting suspected abuse: Positively influencing the development of the student within the classroom. *Professional School Counseling*, 1(3), 57-60.
- Bass, G. (2017). *The Role of Foster Parents in Improving Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care*.
- Bassuk, E. L., & Friedman, S. M. (2005). *Facts on trauma and homeless children: From the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Homelessness and Extreme Poverty Working Group*. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Homeless and Extreme Poverty Working Group.

- Batsche, C., Hart, S., Ort, R., Armstrong, M., Strozier, A., & Hummer, V. (2014). Post-secondary transitions of youth emancipated from foster care. *Child & Family Social Work, 19*(2), 174-184.
- Baum, S., Ma, J., & Payea, K. (2010). Education pays 2010: The benefits of higher education for individuals and society. Retrieved from CollegeBoard Advocacy & Policy Center website:
<https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/education-pays-2010-full-report.pdf>
- Bell, T., & Romano, E. (2015). Child resilience in out-of-home care: Child welfare worker perspectives. *Children and Youth Services Review, 48*, 49-59.
- Belsky, J., Jaffee, S. R., Sligo, J., Woodward, L., & Silva, P. A. (2005). Intergenerational transmission of warm-sensitive-stimulating parenting: A prospective study of mothers and fathers of 3-year-olds. *Child development, 76*(2), 384-396.
- Benbenishty, R., Siegel, A., & Astor, R. A. (2017). School-Related Experiences of Adolescents in Foster Care: A Comparison With Their High-School Peers.
- Benoit, D., Zeanah, C. H., & Barton, M. L. (1989). Maternal attachment disturbances in failure to thrive. *Infant Mental Health Journal, 10*(3), 185-202.
- Berridge, D. (2012). Educating young people in care: What have we learned?. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(6), 1171-1175.
- Beyerlein, B. A., & Bloch, E. (2014). Need for trauma-informed care within the foster care system: A policy issue. *Child Welfare, 93*(3), 7.

- Biehal, N. (2012). A sense of belonging: Meanings of family and home in long-term foster care. *British Journal of Social Work, 44*(4), 955-971.
- Blaustein, M. E., & Kinniburgh, K. M. (2018). *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency*. Guilford Publications.
- Bobbitt, K. C., & Gershoff, E. T. (2016). Chaotic experiences and low-income children's social-emotional development. *Children and youth services review, 70*, 19-29.
- Bobby, C. L. (2013). The evolution of specialties in the CACREP standards: CACREP's role in unifying the profession. *Journal of Counseling and Development, JCD, 91*(1), 35-43.
- Briere, J. N., & Scott, C. (2014). *Principles of trauma therapy: A guide to symptoms, evaluation, and treatment (DSM-5 update)*. Sage Publications.
- Brown, C., Dahlbeck, D., & Sparkman-Barnes, L. (2006). Collaborative relationships: School counselors and non-school mental health professionals working together to improve the mental health needs of students. *Professional School Counseling, 9*(4), 332-335.
- Brown, S., Brack, G., & Mullis, F. (2008). Traumatic symptoms in sexually abused children: Implications for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 11*(6), 368-379.
- Bruskas, D. (2008). Children in foster care: A vulnerable population at risk. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 21*(2), 70-77.

- Bryan, J., & Henry, L. (2008). Strengths-based partnerships: A school-family-community partnership approach to empowering students. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 149-156.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor. (2012). National longitudinal survey of youth 1979 cohort, 1979-2010 (rounds 1-24). Columbus, OH: Center for Human Resource Research, The Ohio State University.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor. (2015a). Career outlook, data on display: Employment and unemployment of recent high school graduates and dropouts. Retrieved from http://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2015/data-on-display/dod_q4.htm
- Bureau of Labor Statistics, U. S. Department of Labor. (2015b). TED: The economics daily: More education still means more pay in 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ted/2015/more-education-still-means-more-pay-in-2014.htm>
- Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2006). Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Caliso, J. A., & Milner, J. S. (1992). Childhood history of abuse and child abuse screening. *Child Abuse & Neglect, 16*(5), 647-659.
- Caplan, G. (1964). Principles of preventive psychiatry.
- Chandler, J. W., Burnham, J. J., Riechel, M. E. K., Dahir, C. A., Stone, C. B., Oliver, D. F., ... & Bledsoe, K. G. (2018). Assessing the Counseling and Non-Counseling Roles of School Counselors. *Journal of School Counseling, 16*(7), n7.

- Chapman, M. V., Wall, A., & Barth, R. P. (2004). Children's voices: the perceptions of children in foster care. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 74(3), 293.
- Chen, C. C., Culhane, D. P., Metraux, S., Park, J. M., Venable, J. C., & Burnett, T. C. (2016). They're not all at home: Residential placements of early adolescents in special education. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 24(4), 247-256.
- Chibbaro, J., & Jackson, C. (2006). Helping students cope in an age of terrorism: Strategies for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 9(4), 314-321.
- Clark, J. J. (2009). GUEST EDITORIAL: Why Social Work Practitioners Need Research Ethics Knowledge. *Social work*, 5-7.
- Clemens, E. V. (2014). Dropping out and into sight: Graduation and dropout rates for Colorado students in foster care: 5-year trend analysis (2007-08 to 2011-12). Greeley, CO: University of Northern Colorado. Retrieved from http://www.cde.state.co.us/dropoutprevention/fostercare_index
- Clemens, E. V., Helm, H. M., Myers, K., Thomas, C., & Tis, M. (2017). The voices of youth formerly in foster care: Perspectives on educational attainment gaps. *Children and Youth Services Review*.
- Clemens, E. V., Lalonde, T. L., & Sheesley, A. P. (2016). The relationship between school mobility and students in foster care earning a high school credential. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 68, 193-201.
- Clemens, E. V., Klopfenstein, K., Lalonde, T. L., & Tis, M. (2018). The effects of placement and school stability on academic growth trajectories of students in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 87, 86-94.

- Clemens, E. V., Klopfenstein, K., Tis, M., & Lalonde, T. L. (2017). Educational stability policy and the interplay between child welfare placements and school moves. *Children and Youth Services Review, 83*, 209-217.
- Clemens, E. V., & Tis, M. (2016). Colorado study of students in foster care: Needs assessment data 2008 to 2014.
- Cole, S. A., & Eamon, M. K. (2007). Self-perceptions of fulfilling the foster caregiver role: A preliminary analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(5), 655-671.
- Cole, S. F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). Helping traumatized children learn: Creating and advocating for trauma-sensitive schools. Massachusetts Advocates for Children.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American journal of sociology, 94*, S95-S120.
- Collins, M. E., Spencer, R., & Ward, R. (2010). Supporting youth in the transition from foster care: Formal and informal connections. *Child Welfare, 89*(1),125.
- Colorado Department of Education, The Office of Dropout Prevention and Student Re-engagement. (2017). 2014-15 state policy report: Dropout prevention and student engagement. Retrieved from <https://www.cde.state.co.us/dropoutprevention>
- Cooper, L., & Wortman, S. (2017). Study on the perspectives of teachers in the K-12 system on how experiences of trauma that children encounter impact the learning environment.

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs. (2016). 2016 standards. Retrieved from

<http://www.cacrep.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2016-Standards-with-Glossary-7.2017.pdf>

Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A. L., Cusick, G. R., Havlicek, J., Perez, A., & Keller, T. E. (2007). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth:

Outcomes at age 21.

Courtney, M. E., & Hook, J. L. (2017). The potential educational benefits of extending foster care to young adults: Findings from a natural experiment. *Children and youth services review*, 72, 124-132.

Courtois, C. A., & Gold, S. N. (2009). The need for inclusion of psychological trauma in the professional curriculum: A call to action. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 1(1), 3.

Cox, T. L. (2012). Improving educational outcomes for children and youths in foster care. *Children & Schools*, 35(1), 59-62.

Creswell, J. W., & Clark, V. L. P. (2007). Designing and conducting mixed methods research.

Crotty, M. (1998) Chapter 8: Feminism: Re-visioning the man-made world. In *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. (160-182). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Cummings, K. (2016). The Impact of Foster Care on Depression: An Examination of Placement Type and Mental Health Service Utilization Among Children and Adolescents.

- Cutuli, J. J., Desjardins, C. D., Herbers, J. E., Long, J. D., Heistad, D., Chan, C. K., ... & Masten, A. S. (2013). Academic achievement trajectories of homeless and highly mobile students: Resilience in the context of chronic and acute risk. *Child development, 84*(3), 841-857.
- Dahir, C. A. (2001). The national standards for school counseling programs: Development and implementation. *Professional School Counseling, 4*(5), 320.
- Daining, C., & DePanfilis, D. (2007). Resilience of youth in transition from out-of-home care to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 29*(9), 1158-1178.
- Danese, A., Moffitt, T. E., Harrington, H., Milne, B. J., Polanczyk, G., Pariante, C. M., ... & Caspi, A. (2009). Adverse childhood experiences and adult risk factors for age-related disease: depression, inflammation, and clustering of metabolic risk markers. *Archives of pediatrics & adolescent medicine, 163*(12), 1135-1143.
- Dass-Brailsford, P. (2007). A practical approach to trauma: Empowering interventions. Sage.
- Davidson-Arad, B., & Navaro-Bitton, I. (2015). Resilience among adolescents in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 59*, 63-70.
- Day, A. G., Baroni, B., Somers, C., Shier, J., Zammit, M., Crosby, S., ... & Hong, J. S. (2017). Trauma and Triggers: Students' Perspectives on Enhancing the Classroom Experiences at an Alternative Residential Treatment-Based School. *Children & Schools, 39*(4), 227-237.

- Day, A., Riebschleger, J., Dworsky, A., Damashek, A., & Fogarty, K. (2012). Maximizing educational opportunities for youth aging out of foster care by engaging youth voices in a partnership for social change. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(5), 1007-1014.
- Del Quest, A., Fullerton, A., Geenen, S., & Powers, L. (2012). Voices of youth in foster care and special education regarding their educational experiences and transition to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(9), 1604-1615.
- Dill, K., Flynn, R. J., Hollingshead, M., & Fernandes, A. (2012). Improving the educational achievement of young people in out-of-home care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(6), 1081-1083.
- Dukes, S. (1984). Phenomenological methodology in the human sciences. *Journal of religion and health, 23*(3), 197-203
- Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., Dymnicki, A. B., Taylor, R. D., & Schellinger, K. B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child development, 82*(1), 405-432.
- Eberts, S. E. (2010). *School Mental Health Professionals' Experiences of Hurricane Katrina Evacuees: A Phenomenological Approach*. Georgia State University.
- Eppler, C. (2008). Exploring themes of resiliency in children after the death of a parent. *Professional School Counseling, 11*(3), 189-196.

- Eschenauer, R., & Chen-Hayes, S. F. (2005). The transformative individual school counseling model: An accountability model for urban school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 244-248*.
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 42 U.S.C. § 675(1)(G)(ii), (2015).
- Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 20 U.S.C. § 1000, et seq, (2015).
- Fargas-Malet, M., McSherry, D., Larkin, E., & Robinson, C. (2010). Research with children: Methodological issues and innovative techniques. *Journal of early childhood research, 8(2)*, 175-192.
- Feldwisch, R. P., & Whiston, S. C. (2016). Examining school counselors' commitments to social justice advocacy. *Professional School Counseling, 19(1)*, 166-175.
- Field, K. (2017, September 22). From Foster Care to Freshman Year. *Chronicle of Higher Education*. p. 27.
<https://www-chronicle-com.unco.idm.oclc.org/article/From-Foster-Care-to-Freshman/241207>
- Finkelhor, D., Turner, H. A., Shattuck, A., & Hamby, S. L. (2015). Prevalence of childhood exposure to violence, crime, and abuse: Results from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence. *JAMA pediatrics, 169(8)*, 746-754.
- Foley-Nicpon, M., & Assouline, S. G. (2015). Counseling Considerations for the Twice Exceptional Client. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 93(2)*, 202-211.
- Fontes, L. A. (2000). Children exposed to marital violence: How school counselors can help. *Professional School Counseling, 3(4)*, 231.

- Forkey, H. C., Morgan, W., Schwartz, K., & Sagor, L. (2016). Outpatient clinic identification of trauma symptoms in children in foster care. *Journal of child and family studies*, 25(5), 1480-1487.
- Forsyth, C. J., Asmus, G., Forsyth, Y. A., & Stokes, B. (2012). Life on course for trouble: Comparing the standardized test scores and school behavior of children in foster care with the general population of students. *The International Journal of Crime, Criminal Justice and Law*, 7(1/2), 1-13.
- Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, 42 U.S.C. § 1305, et seq. (2008).
- Fox, A., & Berrick, J. D. (2007). A response to no one ever asked us: A review of children's experiences in out-of-home care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 24(1), 23-51.
- Frankl, V. (1963). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Fratto, C. M. (2016). Trauma-informed care for youth in foster care. *Archives of psychiatric nursing*, 30(3), 439-446.
- Fritz, G. K. (2017). The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*, 33(9), 8-8.
- Geltner, J., & Leibforth, T. (2008). Advocacy in the IEP process: Strengths-based school counseling in action. *Professional School Counseling*, 12(2), 162-165.
- Geroski, A. M. (2000). Addressing the needs of foster children within a school counseling program. *Professional School Counseling*, 3(3), 152.

- Gibson, D. M., Dollarhide, C. T., Conley, A. H., & Lowe, C. (2018). The construction and validation of the school counseling transformational leadership inventory. *Journal of Counselor Leadership and Advocacy*, 5(1), 1-12.
- Goldson, E. (2002, July). Maltreatment among children with disabilities. In 14th International Congress on Child Abuse and Neglect. Denver, Colorado.
- Gorman, J., Leifer, M., & Grossman, G. (1993). Nonorganic failure to thrive: Maternal history and current maternal functioning. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 22(3), 327-336.
- Goodman-Scott, E. (2015), School Counselors' Perceptions of Their Academic Preparedness and Job Activities. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 54: 57–67. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2015.00070.x
- Graham, K. E., Schellinger, A. R., & Vaughn, L. M. (2015). Developing strategies for positive change: Transitioning foster youth to adulthood. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 54, 71-79.
- Green, T. D., & Mathiesen, S. G. (2017). Who CARES? Interprofessional Competencies for Meeting the Complex Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Foster Youth With Disabilities. *Advances in Social Work*, 17(2), 166-186.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). Fourth generation evaluation. Sage.
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. *Handbook of qualitative research*, 2(163-194), 105.

- Gunaratnam, S., & Alisic, E. (2017). Epidemiology of Trauma and Trauma-Related Disorders in Children and Adolescents. In *Evidence-Based Treatments for Trauma Related Disorders in Children and Adolescents* (pp. 29-47). Springer International Publishing.
- Hambrick, E. P., Oppenheim-Weller, S., N'zi, A. M., & Taussig, H. N. (2016). Mental health interventions for children in foster care: A systematic review. *Children and youth services review, 70*, 65-77.
- Harfeld, A., & Marlowe, K. (2017). Making America's Children Safe Again. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal, 68*(1), 115-128.
- Harper, J., & Schmidt, F. (2016). Effectiveness of a group-based academic tutoring program for children in foster care: A randomized controlled trial. *Children and Youth Services Review, 67*, 238-246.
- Harwick, R. M., Lindstrom, L., & Unruh, D. (2017). In their own words: Overcoming barriers during the transition to adulthood for youth with disabilities who experienced foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 73*, 338-346.
- Hass, M., & Graydon, K. (2009). Sources of resiliency among successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 31*(4), 457-463.
- Hass, M., Allen, Q., & Amoah, M. (2014). Turning points and resilience of academically successful foster youth. *Children and Youth Services Review, 44*, 387-392.
- Havlik, S. A., Rowley, P., Puckett, J., Wilson, G., & Neason, E. (2017). "Do Whatever You Can To Try To Support That Kid": School Counselors' Experiences Addressing Student Homelessness. *Professional School Counseling, 21*(1), 47-59.

- Hays, D. G., & Wood, C. (2011). Infusing qualitative traditions in counseling research designs. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 89*(3), 288-295.
- Heckman, J., Humphries, J., & Mader, N. (2010). The GED (NBER Working Paper No.16064). Retrieved from the National Bureau of Economic Research website: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w16064>
- Hemmings, C. (2016). Counseling Individuals of Color Who Have Experienced Race Based Trauma: Counselors' Experiences with Identifying, Training, Treating, Policy, and Perceived Competency.
- Henderson, P., & Gysbers, N. C. (2006). Providing administrative and counseling supervision for school counselors. *VISTAS: Compelling perspectives on counseling, 161-163*.
- Henriksen, R. C., Nelson, J., & Watts, R. E. (2010). Specialty training in counselor education programs: An exploratory study. *Journal of Professional Counseling, Practice, Theory, & Research, 38*(1), 39.
- Henry, J. P. (1997). Psychological and physiological responses to stress: the right hemisphere and the hypothalamo-pituitary-adrenal axis, an inquiry into problems of human bonding. *Acta physiologica scandinavica. Supplementum, 640*, 10-25.
- Heppner, P. P., Wampold, B. E., & Kivlighan, D. M. (2008). Quantitative descriptive designs. *Research designs in counseling, 3*, 224-255.
- Herbers, J. E., Reynolds, A. J., & Chen, C. C. (2013). School mobility and developmental outcomes in young adulthood. *Development and psychopathology, 25*(2), 501-515.
- Herman, J. L. (1997). Trauma and recovery (Rev. ed.).

- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Williams, E. N. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *The counseling psychologist, 25*(4), 517-572.
- Holloway, I. (1997). *Basic concepts for qualitative research*. Wiley-Blackwell, 1997.
- Holman, L. F., Watts, R., Robles-Pina, R., & Grubbs, L. (2018). Exploration of Potential Predictor Variables Leading to School Counselor Burnout. *Journal of School Counseling, 16*(9), n9.
- House, R. M., & Hayes, R. L. (2002). School counselors: Becoming key players in school reform. *Professional School Counseling, 5*, 249-256.
- Hudson, A. L. (2013). Career mentoring needs of youths in foster care: Voices for change. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing, 26*(2), 131-137.
- Hunter, D. R., Monroe, P. A., & Garand, J. C. (2014). Understanding correlates of higher educational attainment among foster care youths. *Child Welfare, 93*(5), 9-26.
- Husserl, E. (1970). *The crisis of European sciences and transcendental phenomenology: An introduction to phenomenological philosophy*. Northwestern University Press.
- Husserl, E., & Frege, G. (1977). *Readings on Edmund Husserl's "Logical Investigations"*. M. Nijhoff.
- Husserl, G. (1938). Public Policy and Ordre Public. *Virginia Law Review, 37*-67.
- Hutchinson, S. A., Wilson, M. E., & Wilson, H. S. (1994). Benefits of participating in research interviews. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship, 26*(2), 161-166.
- Ickovics, J. R., Meade, C. S., Kershaw, T. S., Milan, S., Lewis, J. B., & Ethier, K. A. (2006). Urban teens: Trauma, posttraumatic growth, and emotional distress among female adolescents. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology, 74*(5), 841.

- Ingersoll, R. E., & Bauer, A. L. (2004). An integral approach to spiritual wellness in school counseling settings. *Professional School Counseling*, 301-308.
- Kenny, M. C., & Abreu, R. L. (2016). Mandatory Reporting of Child Maltreatment for Counselors: An Innovative Training Program. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Counseling*, 2(2), 112-124.
- Kenny, M. C., Vazquez, A., Long, H., & Thompson, D. (2017). Implementation and program evaluation of trauma-informed care training across state child advocacy centers: An exploratory study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 73, 15-23.
- Kilmer, R. P. (2006). Resilience and posttraumatic growth in children. *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice*, 264-288.
- Kim, Y. (2011). The pilot study in qualitative inquiry: Identifying issues and learning lessons for culturally competent research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 10(2), 190-206.
- Kirk, R., & Day, A. (2011). Increasing college access for youth aging out of foster care: Evaluation of a summer camp program for foster youth transitioning from high school to college. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(7), 1173-1180.
- Kline, W. B. (2008). Developing and submitting credible qualitative manuscripts. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 47(4), 210-217.
- Kleinman, A. B. (2018). *Designing Professional Development Training For Secondary School Counseling Based on Perceptions of Teachers, Students, Parents and American School Counselor Association (ASCA) National Model® Framework* (Doctoral dissertation, College of Saint Elizabeth).

- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2009). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Lancaster, G. A., Dodd, S., & Williamson, P. R. (2004). Design and analysis of pilot studies: recommendations for good practice. *Journal of evaluation and clinical practice*, 10(2), 307-212.
- Legal Center for Foster Care & Education (2016). How can state law support school continuity and success for students in foster care? Retrieved from <https://firstfocus.org/resources/report/can-state-law-support-school-continuity-success-studentsfoster-care/>.
- Lemberger, M. E., Selig, J. P., Bowers, H., & Rogers, J. E. (2015). Effects of the student success skills program on executive functioning skills, feelings of connectedness, and academic achievement in a predominantly Hispanic, low-income middle school district. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 93(1), 25-37.
- Lenz, A. S., Haktanir, A., & Callender, K. (2017). Meta-Analysis of Trauma-Focused Therapies for Treating the Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 95(3), 339-353.
- Levine, S. Z., Laufer, A., Stein, E., Hamama-Raz, Y., & Solomon, Z. (2009). Examining the relationship between resilience and posttraumatic growth. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 22(4), 282-286.
- Lev-Wiesel, R., Amir, M., & Besser, A. (2004). Posttraumatic growth among female survivors of childhood sexual abuse in relation to the perpetrator identity. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 10(1), 7-17.

- Lietz, C. A., Langer, C. L., & Furman, R. (2006). Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative research in social work: Implications from a study regarding spirituality. *Qualitative social work, 5*(4), 441-458.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry* (Vol. 75). Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Lokeman, K. S. (2011). *Trauma Training for School Counselors: How Well Do Programs Prepare?*. Regent University.
- Luthar, S. S., Cicchetti, D., & Becker, B. (2000). The construct of resilience: A critical evaluation and guidelines for future work. *Child development, 71*(3), 543-562.
- Mampane, M., & Ross, E. (2017). Beyond the silence: emotional experiences of adolescents in foster care. *Southern African Journal of Social Work and Social Development, 29*(1), 107-121.
- Mariscal, E. S., Akin, B. A., Lieberman, A. A., & Washington, D. (2015). Exploring the path from foster care to stable and lasting adoption: Perceptions of foster care alumni. *Children and Youth Services Review, 55*, 111-120.
- Martin, S. L., Ashley, O. S., White, L., Axelson, S., Clark, M., & Burrus, B. (2017). Incorporating Trauma-Informed Care Into School-Based Programs. *Journal of school health, 87*(12), 958-967.
- Maslow, A. H. (1964). *Religions, values, and peak-experiences* (Vol. 35). Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Masten, A., Herbers, J., Cutuli, J., & Lafavor, T. (2008). Promoting competence and resilience in the school context. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 76-84.

- McCabe, J. (2018). Child Welfare Interviews at School: A Review of Statues and Policies. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 1-19.
- McMahon, H., Mason, E., & Paisley, P. (2009). School counselor educators as educational leaders promoting systemic change. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(2), 116-124.
- McMillen, C., Auslander, W., Elze, D., White, T., & Thompson, R. (2003). Educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care. *Child Welfare*, 82(4), 475-495.
- Mehana, M., & Reynolds, A. J. (2004). School mobility and achievement: A meta-analysis. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26(1), 93-119.
- Merriam, S. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.
- Mertens, D. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology*. Thousand Oaks.
- Meyerson, D. A., Grant, K. E., Carter, J. S., & Kilmer, R. P. (2011). *Posttraumatic growth among children and adolescents: A systemic review*. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 31, 949-964. doi:10.1016/j.cpr.2011.06.003
- Milam, J. E., Ritt-Olson, A., & Unger, J. B. (2004). Posttraumatic growth among adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 19(2), 192-204.
- Miller, J. J., & Collins-Camargo, C. (2016). Success on Their Own Terms: Youths' Perspectives on Successful Foster Care. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 10(1), 59-78.
- Milsom, A., & McCormick, K. (2015). Evaluating an accountability mentoring approach for school counselors. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 27-35.

- Minton, C. A. B., & Pease-Carter, C. (2011). The status of crisis preparation in counselor education: A national study and content analysis. *Journal of Professional Counseling, Practice, Theory, & Research*, 38(2), 5.
- Mitchell, M. B. (2017). "No One Acknowledged My Loss and Hurt": Non-death Loss, Grief, and Trauma in Foster Care. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 1-9.
- Morris, C. (2017). From Foster Care to Higher Ed. *Diverse: Issues In Higher Education*, 34(19), 8.
- Montserrat, C., & Casas, F. (2018). The education of children and adolescents in out-of-home care: a problem or an opportunity? Results of a longitudinal study. *European Journal of Social Work*, 21(5), 750-763.
- Morton, B. M. (2017). The grip of trauma: how trauma disrupts the academic aspirations of foster youth. *Child Abuse & Neglect*.
- Moss, L., Land, C., & Tuttle, M. (2017). Counseling Adolescents in School and Clinical Mental Health Settings. *Counseling Children and Adolescents: Working in School and Clinical Mental Health Settings*, 53.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Mundkur, N. (2005). Neuroplasticity in children. *The Indian Journal of Pediatrics*, 72(10), 855-857.

- National Center for Education Statistics. (2015). Common core data: Table 1. Public high school 4-year adjusted cohort graduation rate (ACGR), by race/ethnicity and selected demographics for the United States, the 50 states, and the District of Columbia: School year 2013–14. Retrieved from https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/tables/ACGR_RE_and_characteristics_2013-14.asp
- Nitza, A., Fineran, K. R., & Dobias, B. (2015). Professional Counselors' Impact on Schools. In *Prevention Science in School Settings* (pp. 67-87). Springer, New York, NY.
- Nybell, L. M. (2013). Locating “youth voice:” Considering the contexts of speaking in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 35*(8), 1227-1235.
- Okpych, N. (2012). Policy framework supporting youth aging-out of foster care through college: Review and recommendations. *Children and Youth Services Review, 34*(7), 1390-1396.
- Osher, D. M. (2002). Creating comprehensive and collaborative systems. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 11*(1), 91-99.
- Padgett, D. K. (2016). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (Vol. 36). Sage Publications.
- Palmieri, L. E., & LaSalle, T. P. (2016). Supporting Students in Foster Care. *Psychology in the Schools, 54*(2), 117-126.
- Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2008). Positive psychology and character strengths: Application to strengths-based school counseling. *Professional School Counseling, 12*(2), 85-92.

- Pechtel, P., & Pizzagalli, D. A. (2011). Effects of early life stress on cognitive and affective function: an integrated review of human literature. *Psychopharmacology*, 214(1), 55-70.
- Pecora, P. J. (2012). Maximizing educational achievement of youth in foster care and alumni: Factors associated with success. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(6), 1121-1129.
- Pecora, P. J., Jensen, P. S., Romanelli, L. H., Jackson, L. J., & Ortiz, A. (2009). Mental health services for children placed in foster care: an overview of current challenges. *Child welfare*, 88(1), 5.
- Perry, B. D. (2001). Bonding and attachment in maltreated children. *The Child Trauma Center*, 3, 1-17.
- Perry, B. D. (2009). Examining child maltreatment through a neurodevelopmental lens: Clinical applications of the neurosequential model of therapeutics. *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 14(4), 240-255.
- Perry, B. L. (2006). Understanding social network disruption: The case of youth in foster care. *Social Problems*, 53(3), 371-391.
- Petrenko, C. L., Culhane, S. E., Garrido, E. F., & Taussig, H. N. (2011). Do youth in out-of-home care receive recommended mental health and educational services following screening evaluations?. *Children and youth services review*, 33(10), 1911-1918.
- Pianta, R. C. (1999). *Enhancing relationships between children and teachers*. American Psychological Association.

- Portwood, S. G., Boyd, S. A., Nelson, E. B., Murdock, T. B., Hamilton, J., & Miller, A. D. (2018). A comparison of outcomes for children and youth in foster and residential group care across agencies. *Children and Youth Services Review, 85*, 19-25.
- Pratchett, L. C., & Yehuda, R. (2011). Foundations of posttraumatic stress disorder: Does early life trauma lead to adult posttraumatic stress disorder?. *Development and Psychopathology, 23*(2), 477-491.
- Purtle, J., & Lewis, M. (2017). Mapping “Trauma-Informed” Legislative Proposals in US Congress. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research, 1-10*.
- Pynoos, R. S., Fairbank, J. A., & James-Brown, C. (2011). Special forward effectively addressing the impact of child traumatic stress in child welfare. *Child welfare, 90*(6), 11.
- Ratts, M. J., DeKruyf, L., & Chen-Hayes, S. F. (2007). The ACA advocacy competencies: A social justice advocacy framework for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 11*(2), 2156759X0701100203.
- Rayburn, A. D., McWey, L. M., & Cui, M. (2016). The interrelationships between trauma and internalizing symptom trajectories among adolescents in foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review, 61*, 332-336.
- Rebelez, J. L. (2013). Serving foster youth in the school setting: Ethical considerations. *School Psychology: From Science to Practice, 6*(1), 19–26.
- Remler, D. K., & Van Ryzin, G. G. (2010). *Research methods in practice: Strategies for description and causation*. Sage Publications.

- Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E.A. (2005), 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry'. *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 959-978.
- Riebschleger, J., Day, A., & Damashek, A. (2015). Foster care youth share stories of trauma before, during, and after placement: Youth voices for building trauma-informed systems of care. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma*, 24(4), 339-360.
- Riggs, D. W., Augoustinos, M., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2009). Role of foster family belonging in recovery from child maltreatment. *Australian Psychologist*, 44(3), 166-173.
- Rios, S. J., & Rocco, T. S. (2014) Barriers and Supports on the Road to Postsecondary Education. *Emerging Adulthood*, 2 (3), 227-237.
- Rock, W. D., Remley, T. P., & Range, L. M. (2017). Principal-Counselor Collaboration and School Climate. *NASSP Bulletin*, 101(1), 23-35.
- Rome, S. H., & Raskin, M. (2017). Transitioning Out of Foster Care: The First 12 Months. *Youth & Society*, 0044118X17694968.
- Rowley, P. J. (2017). *School Counselor Advocacy: Postsecondary Planning for Adolescents Experiencing Emotional Disturbances in Urban Environments* (Doctoral dissertation, Virginia Tech).
- Saakvitne, K. W., Gamble, S., Pearlman, L. A., & Lev, B. T. (2000). Risking connection: A training curriculum for working with survivors of childhood abuse.

- Savitz-Romer, M. (2012), The Gap Between Influence and Efficacy: College Readiness Training, Urban School Counselors, and the Promotion of Equity. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 51: 98–111. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6978.2012.00007.x
- Schwandt, T. A., & Schwandt, T. A. (2001). *Dictionary of qualitative inquiry* (Vol. 31, pp. 439-448). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Shonk, S. M., & Cicchetti, D. (2001). Maltreatment, competency deficits, and risk for academic and behavioral maladjustment. *Developmental psychology*, 37(1), 3.
- Siegfried, C. B., Ko, S. J., & Kelley, A. (2004). Victimization and juvenile offending. *National Child Traumatic Stress Network*.
- Singh, A., Urbano, A., Haston, M., & McMahan, E. (2010). School counselors' strategies for social justice change: A grounded theory of what works in the real world. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(3), 135-145.
- Sippel, L., Pietrzak, R., Charney, D., Mayes, L., & Southwick, S. (2015). How does social support enhance resilience in the trauma-exposed individual?. *Ecology and Society*, 20(4).
- Stevens, H., & Wilkerson, K. (2010). The developmental assets and ASCA's national standards: A crosswalk review. *Professional School Counseling*, 13(4), 227-233.
- Stevens, J. E. (2013). Nearly 35 million US children have experienced one or more types of childhood trauma. *ACEs Too High*.
- Stewart-Spencer, S. E. (2010). *Preventing indirect effects of trauma: Educational preparation of counseling students*. Regent University.

- Stone, S., D'andrade, A., & Austin, M. (2006). Educational services for children in foster care: Common and contrasting perspectives of child welfare and education stakeholders. *Journal of Public Child Welfare, 1*(2), 53-70.
- Stone, C., & Dahir, C. A. (2015). *The transformed school counselor*. Nelson Education.
- Storer, H. L., Barkan, S. E., Stenhouse, L. L., Eichenlaub, C., Mallillin, A., & Haggerty, K. P. (2014). In search of connection: The foster youth and caregiver relationship. *Children and youth services review, 42*, 110-117.
- Streeck-Fischer, A., & van der Kolk, B. A. (2000). Down will come baby, cradle and all: Diagnostic and therapeutic implications of chronic trauma on child development. *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry, 34*(6), 903-918.
- Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. *Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Rockville*.
- Sullivan, P. M., & Knutson, J. F. (2000). Maltreatment and disabilities: A population-based epidemiological study. *Child abuse & neglect, 24*(10), 1257-1273.
- Swanson, C. B., & Schneider, B. (1999). Students on the move: Residential and educational mobility in America's schools. *Sociology of Education, 54*-67.
- Taylor, E. W. (2017). Transformative learning theory. In *Transformative Learning Meets Bildung* (pp. 17-29). SensePublishers, Rotterdam.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1995). *Trauma and transformation*. Sage.

- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The Posttraumatic Growth Inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of traumatic stress, 9*(3), 455-471.
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). " Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence". *Psychological inquiry, 15*(1), 1-18.
- Terr, L. C. (2003). Childhood traumas: An outline and overview. *Focus, 1*(3), 322-334.
- Tessier, N. G., O'Higgins, A., & Flynn, R. J. (2017). Neglect, educational success, and young people in out-of-home care: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *Child Abuse & Neglect*.
- Tishelman, A. C., Haney, P., O'Brien, J. G., & Blaustein, M. E. (2010). A framework for school-based psychological evaluations: Utilizing a 'trauma lens'. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 3*(4), 279-302.
- Tobolowsky, B. F., Madden, E. E., & Scannapieco, M. (2017). Living on the Edge: The Postsecondary Journeys of Foster Care Alumni. *College Student Affairs Journal, 35*(1), 86-100.
- Trusty, J., & Brown, D. (2005). Advocacy competencies for professional school counselors. *Professional School Counseling, 259-265*.
- U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2017). *The Condition of Education 2017* (NCES 2017-144). Retrieved from: <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=40>

- U.S. Department of Education & U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (2017). ED and HHS letter to chief state school officers and child welfare directors on implementing the Fostering Connections Act, May 30, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/about/inits/ed/foster-care/index.html>
- U.S. Department of Health And Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2017). The AFCARS Report, October 20, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>
- Unrau, Y. A., Dawson, A., Hamilton, R. D., & Bennett, J. L. (2017). Perceived value of a campus-based college support program by students who aged out of foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 78, 64-73.
- Unrau, Y. A., Seita, J. R., & Putney, K. S. (2008). Former foster youth remember multiple placement moves: A journey of loss and hope. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(11), 1256-1266.
- Vasileva, M., & Petermann, F. (2016). Attachment, development, and mental health in abused and neglected preschool children in foster care: a meta-analysis. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 1524838016669503.
- Villagrana, M., Guillen, C., Macedo, V., & Lee, S. Y. (2018). Perceived self-stigma in the utilization of mental health services in foster care and post foster care among foster care alumni. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 85, 26-34.

- Vythilingam, M., Heim, C., Newport, J., Miller, A., Anderson, E., Bronen, R... (2002). Childhood Trauma Associated with Smaller Hippocampal Volume in Women With Major Depression. *American Journal of Psychiatry*. Retrieved from <https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/appi.ajp.159.12.2072>
- Wachter, C. A., & Barrio-Minton, C. A. (2012). Crisis in the curriculum? New counselor's crisis preparation, experiences and self-efficacy. *Counselor Education & Supervision*, 51, 256-269.
- West, S. D., Day, A. G., Somers, C. L., & Baroni, B. A. (2014). Student perspectives on how trauma experiences manifest in the classroom: Engaging court-involved youth in the development of a trauma-informed teaching curriculum. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 38, 58-65.
- Widom, C. S. (2013). Long-term consequences of child maltreatment. In J. E. Korbin, & R. D. Krugman (Eds.), *Handbook of child maltreatment* (pp. 225–250). *New York, NY: Springer*.
- Wiest-Stevenson, C., & Lee, C. (2016). Trauma-informed schools. *Journal of evidence-informed social work*, 13(5), 498-503.
- Williams, J. M., & Portman, T. A. A. (2014). “No One Ever Asked Me”: Urban African American Students' Perceptions of Educational Resilience. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 42(1), 13-30.
- Williams, J., Steen, S., Albert, T., Dely, B., Jacobs, B., Nagel, C., & Irick, A. (2015). Academically resilient, low-income students' perspectives of how school counselors can meet their academic needs. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 155-165.

- Wolpov, R., Johnson, M. M., Hertel, R., & Kincaid, S. O. (2009). *The heart of learning and teaching: Compassion, resiliency, and academic success*. Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) Compassionate Schools.
- Woodward, C., & Joseph, S. (2003). Positive change processes and post-traumatic growth in people who have experienced childhood abuse: understanding vehicles of change. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 76(3), 267-283.
- Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy* (Vol. 1). *New York: Basic books*.
- Young, A., Dollarhide, C. T., & Baughman, A. (2015). The voices of school counselors: Essential characteristics of school counselor leaders. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 36-45.
- Young, A., & Kaffenberger, C. (2015). School Counseling Professional Development: Assessing the use of Data to Inform School Counseling Services. *Professional School Counseling*, 19(1), 46-56. doi:10.5330/1096-2409-19.1.46
- Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L., & Shea, N. M. (2010). Caregivers, school liaisons, and agency advocates speak out about the educational needs of children and youths in foster care. *Social work*, 55(3), 245-254.
- Zirkle, D. S., Peterson, T. L., & Collins-Marotte, J. (2001). The school counselor's role in academic and social adjustment of late-adopted children. *Professional School Counseling*, 4(5), 366.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



Institutional Review Board

DATE: August 10, 2018

TO: Kristin Myers, MA
FROM: University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB

PROJECT TITLE: [1257586-2] Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced trauma and their journey to postsecondary education.

SUBMISSION TYPE: Amendment/Modification

ACTION: APPROVED

APPROVAL DATE: August 10, 2018

EXPIRATION DATE: August 9, 2019

REVIEW TYPE: Expedited Review

Thank you for your submission of Amendment/Modification materials for this project. The University of Northern Colorado (UNCO) IRB has APPROVED your submission. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

This submission has received Expedited Review based on applicable federal regulations.

Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the appropriate revision forms for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office.

All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office.

Based on the risks, this project requires continuing review by this committee on an annual basis. Please use the appropriate forms for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date of August 9, 2019.

Please note that all research records must be retained for a minimum of three years after the completion of the project.

If you have any questions, please contact Nicole Morse at 970-351-1910 or nicole.morse@unco.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

Kristin -

APPENDIX B

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Participant Recruitment Letter

Dear Colleagues and Foster Care Partners,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am seeking participants for a qualitative research study, exploring the experiences of youth formerly in foster care as it relates to having a history of trauma and the impact it had on their K-12 education experiences.

Criteria for participation:

- Must have been in foster care at any time during their K-12 education in a Colorado school
- Over the age of 18
- Hold a high school diploma or equivalent (such as a GED)
- Be enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (2-year, 4-year College or university, technical training program, etc.)
- Identify as someone with a history of trauma.

Participants will be asked to participate in a 1-hour qualitative interview in-person. If geographical location is a barrier, we may conduct the interview over Skype or similar videoconferencing software. No more than 2 hours of time will be spent on the entirety of research participation.

Participants will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card upon completion of the interview.

Participants will receive a copy of their interview transcript via email after the interview has been transcribed. A summary of the interview and general categories that emerged through the interview will be provided to participants to ensure accuracy. Participants will have the opportunity to provide any feedback or changes.

If you know someone who may be interested in participating, or if you have any questions, please contact the primary investigator, Kristin Myers, at Kristin.myers18@gmail.com or (719)930-4797. Additionally, please feel free to forward this email to any individuals whom you may feel would be a good fit for this study.

Thank you in advance for your assistance in furthering the knowledge base of trauma-informed schools for youth in foster care!

Sincerely,

Kristin Myers

APPENDIX C

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE LETTER

Invitation to Participate Letter

Dear potential participant,

Thank you for expressing interest in participating in a study about trauma in K-12 education. I am seeking participants for a research study, exploring the experiences of youth formerly in foster care as it relates to having a history of trauma and the impact it had on their K-12 education experiences.

Criteria for participation:

- Must have been in foster care at any time during their K-12 education in a Colorado school
- Over the age of 18
- Hold a high school diploma or equivalent (such as a GED)
- Be enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (2-year, 4-year College or university, technical training program, etc.)
- Identify as someone with a history of trauma.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to fill out a questionnaire to better understand your experience in the foster care system. Questions include age, gender, ethnicity, current postsecondary education program, length of time spent in foster care, age and grade level during foster placement, and geographic description of school environment (rural, urban, suburban, etc). There will be a place for you to describe additional K-12 settings if there was more than one.

You will also be asked to participate in a 1-hour qualitative interview in-person. If your location is a barrier to participating, the interview could happen over Skype or some other online format. No more than 2 hours of time will be spent on the entirety of research participation. All participants will receive a \$25 Visa gift card for your time upon completion of the interview.

You will receive a copy of your interview transcript via email after the interview has been transcribed into written form. A summary of the interview and general categories that emerged through the interview will be provided to you to ensure what I wrote reflects your experience. You will be able to give me any feedback or changes you have about what I wrote. If you are interested in participating, or if you have any questions, please contact, Kristin Myers, at Kristin.myers18@gmail.com or (719)930-4797. Please forward this email to anyone who you may want to participate in this study. Thank you in advance for your assistance in furthering the knowledge base of trauma-informed schools for youth in foster care and having your voice heard!

Sincerely, Kristin Myers

APPENDIX D
INFORMED CONSENT

**CONSENT FORM FOR HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO**

Project Title: *Nevertheless they persisted: Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced trauma and their journey to postsecondary education.*

Principal Investigator: Kristin Myers, Counselor Education and Supervision
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: myer8521@bears.unco.edu

Research Advisor: Jennifer Smith, PhD, Counselor Education and Supervision
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: jennifera.smith@unco.edu

The purpose of this study is to understand the lived experiences of youth formerly in foster care during their time in K-12 education, specifically in relation to being a student with a trauma history. The interview will be approximately one hour in length. No more than 2 hours of your time will need to be spent on the entirety of research participation. Upon completion of the study you will receive a \$25 Amazon gift card.

The only anticipated risk to participants is that you may experience some discomfort or strong emotions when recalling your experiences of being a student with a history of trauma as it pertains to your K-12 education. I will provide you with a list of local resources available to you if this interview causes you any discomfort, or if you would like to talk to someone further about your experience. You could benefit from participating by learning more yourself, and your experiences as a student. Your participation may benefit the education field, foster care professionals (such as caseworkers or Guardian ad Litem, and the field of counseling and counselor education.

All possible efforts will be made to keep your identity and the information you share confidential. Your name will not be included in report of the data, as you will choose a pseudonym to be used instead. The individual interview will be audio recorded for transcription purposes using a handheld digital recorder. Your recorded answers will not be identified with your name, and will be erased after data analysis. The names of participants will not appear in any professional report of this research and any information from the interviews such as work place or home town/state will not be included. The data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the office of the principal investigator or the research advisor.

The only potential exception to confidentiality is if you disclose to me a behavior or action that leads me to believe you may be in imminent danger to yourself or someone else. If that were the case, I would involve you in that process as much as possible.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study. If you begin participation, you may withdraw at any time. Your decision will not result in loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Office of Sponsored Programs, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-2161.

Participant's Signature Date

Researcher's Signature Date

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW MATERIALS

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your name?
2. As a reminder, your identity will be protected in the results of this study. What pseudonym (made up name) would you like to use in this study?
3. How old are you?
4. What is your ethnicity?
5. What is your gender?
6. About how long did you spend in foster care (days, months, years)?
7. What years were you in placement?
8. What are the ages and grade levels you were in when you were in foster care?
9. What is the best way to describe your K-12 school environment (check all that apply)?
 - Rural
 - Urban
 - Suburban
 - Other: please specify
10. About how many schools did you attend if you went to more than one school during your K-12 education?

APPENDIX F
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Pre-interview relationship building: I will start by asking participants relationship-building questions (e.g. how do you like your school—*I will personalize school if known prior to the interview*, what do you enjoy about what you are studying? What are some of your goals after you finish your program?)

Note: the intent behind asking these types of questions before going over some of the logistics of the interview and the prompt is to ease into the interview process for the participants. I recognize the topic of trauma may be difficult for participants to talk about, and I intend to help them feel as comfortable as possible before starting the interview protocol.

Introduction (after informed consent is signed):

Please complete this demographics sheet so I can understand more about you. Take as much time as you need to fill this out and let me know if you have questions.

After demographics

I am looking forward to talking to you and hearing your thoughts about how things went for you in your journey to postsecondary education. I am going to be asking you to recall some experiences and things that stick out to you. Sharing about your educational history while you were a student in foster care could be difficult to talk about. As a reminder, and you do not need to share anything with me that you feel would be distressing to your wellbeing. If at any time you feel uncomfortable, please let me know and I would be happy to pause or slow down the pace of the interview. I encourage you to honor your own emotions and boundaries, and feel free to stop the interview at any time.

Note to committee: I intend on having a handout that represents educational outcomes for youth in foster care (sheet will contain a visual representation of the graduation rate, dropout rate, and postsecondary rate for students in Colorado). See Appendix G for example. I will use this to prompt to show participants during question two regarding the young person's K-12 educational attainment and matriculation into postsecondary education.

Prompt:

1. Think about your K12 educational experiences and take some time to reflect. When you are ready, tell me about what K12 was like for you, example prompts:
 - What experiences stand out to you in your K12 education? What about these experiences makes them stand out to you?
 - What experiences in your K12 education would you want to experience again? Share what it is about these experiences that makes them impactful to you.
 - What do you wish people better understood about your experience?
 - How did experiencing trauma impact your K12 education?
2. In looking at the educational outcome sheet, you can see a lot of people do not get where you are (completing high school and being enrolled in a postsecondary education program; see Appendix G). How would you say that you're different from those represented on this educational outcome sheet?
 - What contributed to your educational success?
 - Who contributed to your educational success?
3. Tell me about your experiences with your school counselors.

- What stands out to you in thinking about your interactions with school counselors?
 - What role did your school counselors have in your success?
4. You indicated you identify as a person with a history of trauma in order to participate in this study. Tell me about what it was like for you to have experienced trauma in your journey to postsecondary education?
- What did having a history of trauma mean to you?
 - How did you navigate having a trauma history at school?
 - How would you say that you have grown as a result of having these experiences?
 - What thoughts or feelings stood out for you when you were telling me about your experiences?
5. What else would you like to share that we have not talked about related to your K12 journey to postsecondary education?

I will express appreciation for their time and willingness to share their story with me at the end of the interview.

APPENDIX G
LOCAL RESOURCE LIST SAMPLE

Resources

Crisis Services	
Name of Organization	Contact Information
Colorado Crisis Services	1-800-493-8255
Suicide Hotline	1-800-493-8255
Crisis Intervention Team	911
Aurora Medical Center Behavioral Health	303-695-2628 www.auroramed.com
Colorado Crisis Service Walk-in Crisis Center	1-855—493-8255
Denver Health and Hospitals Psychiatric Emergency Services	303-602-7221 www.denverhealth.org
Porter Hospital Emergency Department	303-778-1955 www.porterhospital.org
Community Mental Health Centers	
Aurora Mental Health Center	303-617-2300 www.laumhc.org
Arapahoe Douglas Mental Health Network	303-730-8858 Emergency line 303-730-3303 www.admhn.org
Jefferson Center for Mental Health	303-325-0030 www.jeffersonmentalhealth.org
Foster Care Resources	
Mile High United Way 2-1-1 (food, housing, rent/utility aid, emergency shelter, clothing, transportation, substance abuse, child care, etc.)	211 www.unitedwaydenver.org
United Way Bridging the Gap Program	https://www.unitedwaydenver.org/bridging-the-gap

Note about sample: Once participants were identified, I added a specific contact for counseling services available at the participant's postsecondary institution (if applicable). I also included specific community resources for the participant if they are outside of the Denver-Metro area.

APPENDIX H
EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES HANDOUT

Colorado Graduation and Postsecondary Education Statistics

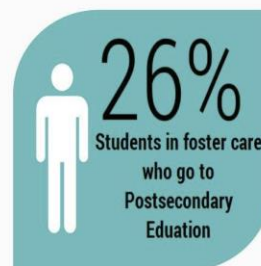
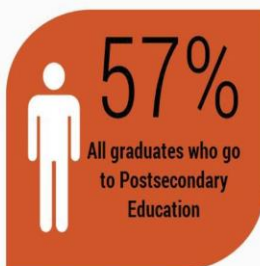
79% Grad Rate All Students



23.6% Grad Rate Foster Care



There are approximately 5,000 students in foster care in K-12 Schools in Colorado. Out of 600 graduates **10%** go to 2-year colleges, **12.4%** go to 4-year colleges, and **3.4%** go to Career and Technical Colleges.



Note: Data includes 2016-17 graduation rates. Data obtained through the Colorado Department of Education in collaboration with the Department of Human Services. Matriculation data is for 2015 and was obtained from NSC/CDHE. Reflects enrollment rates of graduating students in the summer/fall following the identified year of graduation. For questions contact Dan Jorgensen, Ph.D. at bjorgensen_d@cde.state.co.us

APPENDIX I

CODE BOOK

Title of the study: *Nevertheless they persisted: Youth formerly in foster care who have experienced trauma and their journey to postsecondary education.*

Code Book

How to use this code book:

There were 8 primary themes and 43 secondary themes that came through in this study across all participants. Not all participant's comments fit into all themes or secondary themes. Each 8 themes have secondary themes that are related to the overall theme. The secondary themes were common across participants, and similar to the overall theme, not all participants related to all secondary themes. Below is a description of the overall themes and secondary themes. Please review these before reading through your transcript. There are comment bubbles on the transcripts that have the codes assigned to statements made by you. Please review the transcripts and codes to see if they fit with what you wanted to say.

If you have anything to add or if you have any changes to the codes (or the code book itself), please email me and let me know. Please remember that the most important thing in this study is your voice. It is important for me to represent you and what you have to say about your experience accurately, so if you have any changes to these codes or what I wrote, I will be happy to make changes.

Primary Theme 1: Within the Home Environment

This theme refers to the circumstances and experiences of the participants before being placed into foster care as well as caregiver behavior during foster care. Participants described traumatic experiences that led to their removal from the home, and for some, the trauma that continued in the foster care system. **Note: this theme is different from educational and emotional impact theme as this theme refers specifically to the trauma itself and not the impact it had on them.**

Secondary themes of Theme 1:

- **Abuse:** Participants referred to various types of abuse they encountered by caregivers before and sometimes during foster care (e.g. physical, emotional).
- **Caregiver and familial substance abuse:** Some participants had caregivers and family members with substance abuse issues.
- **Death of a parent:** Some participants entered the system due to the death of a parent and some experienced a death of a parent after placement in foster care.

- ***Mental health of caregiver:*** The mental health of a caregiver was a prevalent secondary theme that participant's experienced within the home environment before, and for some during, foster care.
- ***Mobility before foster care:*** Participants often described experiencing home and school mobility due to the circumstances with their caregivers before they entered the foster care system.
- ***Circumstances that led to foster care placement:*** This secondary theme includes any circumstances that led to foster placement that are different from any of the other secondary themes in this overall theme.
- ***Sibling connections:*** Some of the participants mentioned connections to siblings and in particular the different experiences of siblings.

Primary Theme 2: Emotional impact

Overall definition of theme: Educational impact refers to the impact that trauma and experience in the foster care system within the context of the youth's K12 education. This theme includes the psychological experiences the participant's experienced before and after placement in the foster care system. **Note: This theme is different than the "within the home environment" theme as this theme refers to the educational and emotional impact participant's experienced as a result of the trauma and not the trauma itself.**

Secondary themes:

- ***Betrayed by adults and peers:*** Youth described experiences of betrayal by school personnel, child welfare personnel, caregivers, and peers.
- ***Depression:*** Many of the participants described being diagnosed with depression and the impact that had within the context of school.
- ***Identity:*** Participant's discussed feeling a loss of [or change in] identity as a result of the foster care system. This included cultural identity and identity as a student.
- ***Lack of trust:*** Participants describe the distrust that developed over time as a result of their experiences of betrayal in school and child welfare systems.
- ***Mental Health:*** In addition to depression, the participants identified additional health impacts as a result of trauma both before and after being in the foster care system (e.g. anger, mental health issues that resulted in being placed in treatment facilities).
- ***Suicidality:*** Several participants described a history of being suicidal either before or during foster care. Some participants experienced multiple hospitalizations or extended stay in residential treatment facilities.
- ***The Wall:*** The term "the wall" refers to the emotional wall participants described as a way from protecting themselves from additional trauma. For example, "the wall" kept several participants from forming new relationships.
- ***Difficulty relating to the trivial problems of non-foster peers:*** Several participants described what it was like to encounter non-foster care peers with non-trauma related problems (e.g. not getting an iPhone for Christmas, or having to do their own laundry). Participants found it difficult to relate when the trauma-related problems they encountered were profound.
- ***Forced therapy/unhelpful therapists:*** Several participants described having forced interactions with therapists that they did not find beneficial to processing

their trauma. Some participants also described aspects of therapy or therapists that was particularly not helpful in trauma recovery.

Primary Theme 3: Impact on learning

This theme refers to the participant's experiences in various school environments and the school personnel and peers they encountered during their time in K12 education. Note: many participants experienced a variety of school settings and climates.

Secondary themes:

- **Academic impact:** This secondary theme is in reference to the participant's experiences with academics while being in the foster care system. There were varying degrees to which these experiences were positive or negative. Several participants noted gaps in academic curriculum and the impact school mobility had on their current experiences as students in postsecondary institutions.
- **School climate:** Various experiences with school climate were discussed (e.g. a culture of bullying at the school, socioeconomic status of students, school norms).
- **Trauma-informed environments and trauma-informed people:** Collectively the participants attended multiple schools due to mobility. Several participants described school personnel and peers that assisted in them being in a safe, connected, and accessible environment that promoted building healthy relationships (e.g. creating individualized learning environments, taking time to listen to youth wishes).
- **Lack of Trauma-informed environments and people:** This secondary theme is the specific reference to the impact that the lack of a trauma-informed environment had on participant's experiences as students in K12.
- **Type of school environment:** Participants had varying experiences with different types of K12 educational environments (e.g. homeschooling, residential treatment facilities, restrictive settings in traditional K12 school environment).

Primary Theme 4: Impactful Connections

The term impactful connections includes both positive and negative personal connections with school personnel, child welfare personnel, foster parents, biological family members and peers. These connections stood out as particularly impactful in their journey to postsecondary education.

Secondary themes:

- **Bullying:** Participants described their personal experiences with being bullied during their time in K12 education. Note: this is a different sub-theme than the school climate of bullying in that the bullying happened to the participant. Note: this is different than the bullying that was described in the school culture as this secondary theme refers specifically to the youth's experience with being bullied.
- **Foster care system outside of school:** This secondary theme is in reference to individuals within the foster care system that had a impactful impact on the participant's K12 journey to postsecondary education.
- **In school:** This sub theme refers to the connectedness participant's experienced with school personnel that were influential in their journey to postsecondary education. Note: this **does NOT include school counselors** as that is a separate theme. This secondary theme does include impactful relationships with peers and school staff (either positive or negative).

Primary Theme 5: What's a School Counselor?

The theme title “what’s a school counselor” refers to the varying experiences participants had (or did not have) with their school counselors. Some participants did not recall any encounters with school counselors at any time during K-12 years. Some participants needed prompts to know what a school counselor meant (e.g. they needed to hear the term guidance counselor to make the connection). The word “what” also refers to the participant’s positive or negative with school counselors. Participant’s experiences were on the extreme end of positive or negative, and while describing these experiences, they referred to *what* the specific instances or traits that were memorable/impactful and why.

Secondary themes:

- ***Negative experiences with school counselors:*** Negative experiences with school counselors often included being forced to see a school counselor. Participants described these experiences as punitive in nature, or feeling devalued by the school counselor. For example, feeling like the school counselor was not genuine or did not believe in them as students or individuals. This secondary theme includes participants who had forced interactions with school counselors (e.g. it was not their choice to be sent to the school counselor). It also includes the negative impact that mandatory reporting had on the participant (e.g. school counselor reported self-harm or suicidal thoughts to the person who was abusing them and it made things worse).
- ***No experience with school counselor:*** Some participants described not having any experiences with school counselors during their K12 years. The participants with not experiences needed more information during the interview describing the role of a school counselor to answer the prompt.
- ***Positive experience with school counselors:*** Some participants described the positive experiences with a school counselor during K12. They spoke about particular traits of the school counselor as being particularly helpful, such as, being genuine, empathetic, and giving them space to talk on their own terms.
- ***Perceptions of the role of a school counselor:*** Participants with either no experience or negative experiences with school counselors referred to what they viewed as the role of a school counselor (e.g. school counselors are there for scheduling or sending transcripts).

Theme 6: Motivators

The theme motivators includes the variety of things that motivated the participants to earn a high school credential and seek postsecondary education.

Secondary themes:

- ***Extrinsic:*** Participants described wanting to be different [or to have a different outcome] than caregivers and family members. For example, a participant described not wanting the same outcomes that their parent faced as a result of not having an education.
- ***Intrinsic:*** The intrinsic motivators participants described included the internal drive they have to succeed. For example, many participants described how there was never a question they would pursue higher education. Others described an internal drive to succeed.

- **Positive and negative messages from adults and peers:** Participants described how people not believing that they could achieve their goals motivated them to prove these people wrong. Some participants described a variety of positive or negative messages that motivated them to succeed.
- **School as an escape:** This secondary theme refers to participants who described finding solace in school. For example, one participant described school as the only normal or predictable part of their day. Others described leaving home behind to focus on school.

Primary Theme 7: Within the foster care system

Participants described what it was like for them in the foster care system during their journey to a postsecondary education. Some discussed being treated differently as a result of being in the foster care system. Participants describe what it was like to not have a “normal” childhood due to barriers in and out of the educational system that were a result of being in the foster care system. Another salient secondary theme was the stigma associated with being in the foster care system.

Secondary themes:

- **Addressing foster care:** This secondary theme is related to the participant’s experiences with being put in the position to explain their involvement with foster care and/or struggle with what to call foster parents. For example, one participant described asking a coach to introduce his foster father with the youth’s last name so he would not have to address questions from peers.
- **Driver’s license:** Participants describe either not being able to get their driver’s license until they exited the foster care system, or encountering barriers as a result of being in foster care in obtaining a driver’s license (e.g. not being able to afford driver’s education courses, not having a parent to obtain insurance, not having proper documentation to qualify for a driver’s license). Participants spoke about how the lack of consistent transportation impeded their childhood and teenage years.
- **Lack of extracurricular opportunities or and involvement:** Participants described instances where they were not able to participate in extracurricular activities at school due to mobility in foster homes and school mobility. Barriers such as transportation to and from events as reasons for not participating.
- **Foster care stigma/being treated differently because of being in the foster care system:** This secondary theme relates to the participant’s experiences with being treated differently as a result of foster care (e.g. being prejudged by teachers or peers).
- **Foster Placement (home) mobility:** When participant’s changed homes they often felt different than their peers who had stable home environments. For example, several participants did not know what to call their foster parents and struggled explaining why they had a different last name to their peers and school personnel.
- **School mobility:** Changes in home placements often resulted in school moves. The consequences of mobility often included disengagement from developing impactful connections with peers and school personnel. Gaps in academic content were also a consequence of school mobility.

Primary Theme 8: Posttraumatic Growth

Post-traumatic growth theory centers on the idea that growth can occur as a result of trauma, and ultimately can have a significantly positive impact on an individual's life. It is strengths-based and focuses on the idea that individuals who have experienced trauma have the ability to recover and grow, under the right conditions.

Secondary themes:

- ***Appreciation of life:*** Individuals experiencing post-traumatic growth often describe having a changed sense of what is important in life. They have a change in priorities, and what was once viewed as small or trivial, could be of great value and importance after the trauma. For example, a child may have viewed having dinner with a family member as routine, but after the loss of a parent, they may value anytime spent with family more than in the past.
- ***New possibilities:*** New possibilities is described as a response to trauma as the individual's ability to develop new interests, partake in new activities, and embark on new adventures or a new life trajectory. This area of growth is often referred to as, "vulnerable yet stronger". People who experience this type of growth may embark on a career that is related to their trauma. For example, a youth who was formerly in foster care is studying to become a social worker.
- ***Personal strength:*** Trauma survivors may experience an increased sense of personal strength, of one's capacities to survive and prevail after the trauma. This characteristic is often referred to in literature as "resilience". Post-traumatic growth refers to a growth process by which survivors of trauma are personally transformed as a result of the trauma, and these positive changes go far beyond coping with adversity, thus drawing on their personal strength
- ***Relating to others:*** This is the idea that trauma-survivors may feel a greater connection to people in general. The individual may have an increased sense of compassion or empathy towards other people who have experienced trauma or suffering. This trait is also associated with a greater degree and frequency of performing altruistic acts for others. For example, youth in foster care have a sense of responsibility to give back to others in their situation. Individuals also experience a greater sense of intimacy, closeness, and freedom to be oneself in the aftermath of a traumatic event.
- ***Spiritual change:*** Trauma survivors may experience more existential questions about life's purpose and the need to make sense of life after the traumatic experience(s) than before. Individuals often experience a greater sense, or more focused, approach to life. The meaning one places on spirituality is unique to the individual, but in the context of post-traumatic growth, often includes the need to make sense of one's life and purpose post-trauma.

APPENDIX J
DIAGRAM OF THEMES

Within the Home Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abuse Caregiver and Familial Substance Abuse Mental Health of Caregiver 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Death of a Parent Mobility Before Foster Care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Circumstances the Led to Foster Placement Sibling Connections
Emotional Impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Trust Trivial Problems of Non-Foster Peers Depression 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suicidality Mental Health The Wall Betrayed by Adults/Peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identity Forced Therapy and Unhelpful Therapists
Impact on Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academic Impact School Climate Trauma-informed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Trauma-informed Environments/People 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Type of School Environment
What's a School Counselor?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Negative Experience with School Counselor No Experience with School Counselor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive Experience with School Counselors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceptions of the Role of School Counselor
Meaningful Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bullying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster Care System Outside of School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In School
Motivators	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intrinsic Extrinsic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positive and Negative Messages from Adults and Peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> School as an Escape
Posttraumatic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appreciation of Life New Possibilities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal Strength Relating to Others 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spiritual Change
Within the Foster Care System	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Addressing Foster Care Driver's License School Mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Placement (Home) Mobility Lack of Extracurricular Opportunities/Involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster Care Stigma/Treated Differently Because of Foster Care

APPENDIX K
LIST OF ACRONYMS

List of Acronyms

American School Counselor Association (ASCA)

Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP)

Every Student Success Act (ESSA)

Kindergarten through Twelfth Grade (K-12)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)