THE PROUD BUT FEW: WHAT DO SUCCESSFUL FOSTER YOUTH DO TO COMPLETE THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION?

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I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this dissertation is suitable for shelving in the library and credit is to be awarded for the dissertation.

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Caroline Sotello Viernes Turner, Ph.D.  \hfill Date
DEDICATION

To my parents Cesar and Luga, you have shown me from the start what hard work, honesty, commitment, and family values are. I have learned so much from you and I have pushed myself to become better and better and make you proud in everything that I do. Thank you for all your efforts to provide me with a wonderful education, which was the best foundation for me during the college years; but most of all, thank you for a wonderful childhood filled with the best memories that any child can have.

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Fields of Study

Mental and Behavioral Health, Social Services, Education
Abstract

of

THE PROUD BUT FEW: WHAT DO SUCCESSFUL FOSTER YOUTH DO TO COMPLETE THEIR HIGH SCHOOL EDUCATION?

by

Cesar Augusto Castaneda

This qualitative study utilizes Choice Theory as a lens to present the perceptions of youth who successfully completed high school while being placed in the foster care system. Foster youth and their experiences have been a topic researched extensively but mainly through quantitative studies that focus on the challenges the foster youth face and their struggles to obtain an education. The study identified, through the foster youth’s voice, the choices of behavior that effectively helped them meet their educational goals and other basic needs.

The participants in the study were able to identify conscious choice of behavior that included reframing their thinking about themselves as foster youth and the way they perceived teachers and other professionals who provided collateral services for them. This change of thinking led them to make active choices that progressively led them to high school graduation. These choices varied from assuming a teaching role with other peers, to participation in sports, theater or other extra-curricular activities, to volunteering for local non-profits, to being intentional about their peer group, and avoiding illegal, aggressive, or dishonest behaviors.
Through their narratives, the participants recognized services or support systems that were beneficial and assisted them in attaining their educational goals, but also confirmed the challenges commonly known and researched that foster youth often face. This study is significant to foster youth, foster youth advocates, foster parents, and other professionals who are formal or informal support systems for foster youth, as it may provide knowledge and understanding of the experience of foster youth in this study and their success stories. These experiences will provide insight to what these foster youth focused on, planned, and did in order to complete high school and may provide others with ideas and techniques that may assist in the success of other foster youth. Some of these ideas or techniques may turn into procedures or policies that may be implemented in a larger scale and that would affect and even greater number of foster youth.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

According to the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013), in 2010 there were approximately 400,540 children placed in foster care in the United States. The U.S. General Accounting Office reports, “...less than 45% of youth aging out of foster care graduate from high school or get a GED compared to nearly 80% of the general population (See Figure 1). Six to twelve months after exiting foster care, foster youth have a higher rate of public assistance, depression, pregnancy, arrest, and homelessness”.

Figure 1. Percentage of Students who Completed High School in 2010

Education is a significant factor and has the potential to be the most impactful on the future success of foster youth as well as in their formation on becoming productive citizens in our society. Horace Mann’s belief that “education is the great equalizer” is especially significant with the foster youth population since success in education is a
stepping stone toward higher standards of living and better quality of life (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997).

The direct expense of not educating and preparing foster youth is costly to California. According to the 2008-2009 report from the Legislative Analyst’s Office, up to 70% of all California State Penitentiary inmates have spent time in the foster care system and that it costs over $47,000 per year to house an inmate in California; in addition, the State’s Safety and Welfare Remedial Plan filed in April 2007 reports an annual cost of up to $115,000 per inmate depending of the type of facility. According to Cook (1991), only 50% of foster youth have employment 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care; and only 38% maintain employment for over one year. This leads to a high dependency on the welfare system which translates to approximately one out of three foster youth receiving public assistance. In addition to challenges related to dependency, many youth aging out of foster care have significantly higher rates of having mental health diagnoses, teen pregnancy rates, and homelessness. Research suggests that nearly 46% of foster children may be identified with having mental health needs (Sullivan & Van Zy, 2008), that approximately 16% of female foster youth ages 13-21 were pregnant or parenting already (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010), and that approximately one fourth of foster children end up homeless 12 to 18 months after leaving foster care at age 18 (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003).

Attempts to resolve the issue of stability for foster children were made when Assembly Bill 490 went into effect in California in 2004. According to the California Educational Code, Section 48850, Assembly Bill 490 was passed with the “intent of the
Legislature to ensure that all pupils in foster care have a meaningful opportunity to meet the challenging state pupil achievement standards to which all pupils are held”.

Specifically, The Children’s Law Center of California reports that Assembly Bill 490 attempts to address challenges that foster youth face in areas of “maintaining stable school placements, ensuring foster youth’s school placement in the least restrictive environment, efficiency in maintaining accurate student records and data collection, and foster youth access to the academic resources, services, and extracurricular and enrichment activities that are available to all pupils” (p. 1). Under Assembly Bill 490, foster youth are able to continue at their school of origin regardless of address changes or school district of residence. Assembly Bill 490 also protects foster youth’s grades and credits, allowing for partial credits and ensuring that the youth’s grades are not penalized when absent due to placement change. More detailed discussion regarding Assembly Bill 490 will be provided in Chapter 2.

**Problem Statement**

Foster youth are one of the most vulnerable populations in California and the consequences of under educating foster youth have significant, negative impacts to the State. This study was aimed at identifying effective tools or strategies, recognized by foster youth themselves, which could increase high school completion, increase academic achievement, and reduce negative consequences such as incarceration, homelessness, dependency on government assistance, etc. (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1999).

One of the most common experiences of foster youth is moving from placement to placement, whether it is from foster home to foster home, to group home, to kinship
care homes, to non-relative placements, to guardianship placements, or any variation of placement; foster youth tend to move often. Although a substantial amount of research has been done on the effects of school mobility for students in the general population, not a significant amount was found focusing specifically with foster youth which is the population most affected with considerably higher mobility rates than the average student. Conger and Finkelstein (2003) found that as much as 57% of foster youth who entered the system between 1995 and 1999 transferred schools for non-educational reasons.

Another factor affecting foster youth is the presence of a significant support person or group in the foster youth’s life. Research has been done about the importance of having a support system and this is even more significant with this population. Most of the reasons why children enter foster care have to do with issues related to caregiver neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013). The effects of these issues are often associated with low self-esteem, trust issues, inability to connect with others, behavioral challenges, and mental health disorders (Sullivan & Van Zyl, 2008). Foster youth often lack the support system that many other children are supposed to have such as a built-in network of parents, grand-parents, aunts and uncles, cousins, etc. They miss the consistency and permanency of people in their life, therefore miss out on opportunities that they may simply not be aware of or information that they just do not know. This built-in network of support is often responsible for creating a caring and encouraging environment that develops growth into the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence; this network is the safety net that catches them when they fall; this network is
the source of information that forms a child’s ideas, values, and beliefs about themselves and the world around them. This study sought the perceptions of adult foster youth who successfully completed high school in recognizing an individual, or a group, who was supportive to them reaching their goals.

Often foster youth are perceived as the difficult children that no one wants to have nearby or live in their neighborhood; they are teens with “crazy” behaviors that most want to avoid, but few attempt to understand. Understanding their history would be important; learning how they got to be where they are and what skills and tools they have to deal with those challenges. Beyond those who seek to understand them, there are even less who attempt to be a part of the solution and make efforts to assist them in becoming effective and productive members of our community. Those who do not seek to understand or help them, see foster youth as the kids who are the “bad influence” and they fail to see them as regular children needing additional support to address the significant challenges they have.

Qualitative research has been utilized to record the foster youth’s voice on their perceptions of their overall experiences while in foster care, particularly with regard to support systems and relationships with important adults. Singer, Berzin, and Hokanson, (2013) conducted a qualitative inquiry to seek the experiences of foster youth and understand how they utilize support systems as well as the quality of the support systems. Their study resulted in finding patterns related to the type of support system utilized being either formal support systems, consisting of child welfare social workers, foster family agency’s workers, and foster parents; and informal support systems such as foster
youth’s birth parents, grandparents, siblings, and other significant persons identified by the foster child (teacher, pastor, coach, etc.). Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, Powers and The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care (2012) and Ahrens, Dubois, Garrison, Spencer, Richardson, and Lozano (2011) also conducted a qualitative inquiry focusing on the relationships of foster youth with significant adults in their life. Ahrens et al. found themes closely related to what Singer et al. relating to the significant support systems in the life of the foster youth. Some themes were related to the barriers and facilitators of connections from the initial connection to maintaining the relationship between the foster youth and the support system. Ahrens et al. also found a theme they called “Unmet Needs” related to what the participants’ perceptions were of areas where they felt they still lacked skills to successfully navigate the system. The needs of a foster youth and the behaviors they choose to be able to meet those needs are essentially important for this study and will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

By utilizing a qualitative study, the researcher hoped to be able to identify themes and patterns of what has worked for foster youth and what was challenging in their pursuit of a high school education. The researcher conducted interviews with current and former foster youth, 18 years of age or older, who completed high school or were scheduled to complete high school within the past five years.

For this study, the researcher wanted to add to the literature a perspective that originates from the foster youth through their own voice. The study was aimed to identify, by using Choice Theory as a framework of inquiry and as a lens to understand, what foster youth believe is the importance of the relationships and support systems they
have, what choices they were able to make, and what needs they were focusing on to successfully complete their high school education. The researcher sought the use of a strong internal psychology theory, such as Choice Theory, that provides insight to what foster youth needed, wanted, and did in order to accomplish their goals. Some other popular theories explain behavior as a result or reaction to external factors or circumstances that “make us behave”. While the barriers and circumstances that foster youth are very real, the foster youth in this study were able to identify their own needs and wants and make the choices needed to complete a challenging and often overwhelming task such as high school completion.

**Nature of the Study**

The main research questions for this study are:

1. What are adults’ perceptions regarding their focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while in foster care?
2. What are adults' perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

The purpose of this study was to seek understanding on the perceptions that adult foster youth have of their own successful experience navigating the education and foster care system at the same time. Through the qualitative process the goal was to provide more depth and rich data from the voice of the student regarding their educational attainment. Exhaustive research has been done using alarming rates of failure, documenting the struggles of foster youth, but not enough has been done focusing on their success, on their strengths, and the need-fulfilling choices they made. For a
population that struggles with as many challenges as they do, the resiliency shown by the participants may provide insights to others regarding their choices of behavior and the focus on meeting some of their needs while in group or foster care.

By understanding the needs that foster youth have regarding their own care and how to meet them; caregivers, social workers, teachers, and administrators may have a better chance in effectively serving the multiple challenges that this population faces. Much has been discussed about what professionals think or believe are the best ways to address these concerns but not enough effort has been placed in seeking the foster youth’s voice in the process of finding solutions. While there have been many new advocacy groups that represent the voice of former foster youth, the efforts have been insufficient in changing the educational outcomes and academic achievement for them thus far.

Policy makers have attempted to address issues with a variety of bills in the recent years, such as Assembly Bill (AB) 490 and AB 167. AB 490 addresses issues such as school mobility, transfer of records, immediate enrollment in schools, and placement in the appropriate courses. Trailer bills have been placed in effect to amend portions of AB 490 with the hopes to improve its effectiveness in assisting foster youth.

AB 167, which addresses completion of a high school diploma by lowering standards needed for graduation from the State standards to the federal standards (reduction of credits needed from 220 to 136). Little progress has been shown in changing the course for foster youth to better attain educational goals, thus improving the quality of life of foster youth. More on current policy and legislation attempting to address these challenges and its effect will be discussed in Chapter 2.
Theoretical Frameworks

Choice Theory

Choice Theory is a theory developed by Dr. William Glasser that attempts to explains why people do the things they do. Choice Theory attempts to explain human behaviors, helps people understand themselves and helps them better deal with the events and people in their lives. Dr. Glasser believed that all humans have five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Glasser, 1998).

Glasser believed that all human behavior is an attempt to meet one of those needs and, unlike other theories based on needs, such as Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (1943), these needs are not built upon each other or more important than the other. Other than this key difference, Maslow’s needs are quite similar than Glasser’s. For example Glasser’s Survival Need is similar to Maslow’s Physiological and Safety Levels. They both even agree that these are basic needs that are of little interest unless they are being threaten or unmet. Glasser’s Power Need is comparable to the Esteem Level from Maslow in that they are characterized by achievement, confidence, accomplishments, etc. Both Maslow and Glasser have a Love and Belonging Need/Level. Lastly, Maslow’s Self-Actualization Level is described as morality, purpose, meaning, creativity, and spontaneity; these descriptors are closely related to the ones used for Glasser’s Freedom and Fun Needs.

According to Choice Theory, the most important need is the one that is not being met or is not adequately met, thus if one is struggling with survival needs such as food or shelter, the behaviors chosen will be an attempt to meet that need. For the purposes of
this study, the researcher will focus on three of Glasser’s Basic Needs, Survival, related to the basic food, safety and shelter; Power, as it relates to accomplishments and recognition; and Love and Belonging, relating to the important connections in the foster youth’s life, whether formal or informal support systems.

This study utilized Choice Theory as a lens to understand choices of students as they attempt to fulfill their needs. For a population that generally has such low level of achievement and for which most hold fairly low expectations; the participants in this study are clear examples of what can be accomplished with strong internal control and the courage of students who had a desire to achieve more than what was expected of them, who had a strong locus of control, and who did not settle for good enough. More detailed information regarding Choice Theory, its components, its uses, and its strengths and challenges, is included on Chapter 2.

**Operational Definitions**

**Foster Children / Youth**

Foster children or youth enter the system for a variety of reason ranging from physical, sexual, psychological, or emotional abuse, parental neglect, and parents who voluntarily place children in the foster care system due to their inability to effectively and safely care for them (Sullivan & Van Zy, 2008). For the purposes of this study, Foster Youth are defined as 0-20 year olds who reside in a foster home, group home, kinship care home, non-relative care home, foster-adopt home, or a transitional age youth home. The participants in this study completed high school while living in one of the above home environments.
School Mobility

School mobility is defined as any changes in school placement for the student whether it was for educational or non-educational reasons. Educational reasons would be graduation or promotion to junior high or high school. Any other reason will be considered non-educational such as low academic achievement, discipline problems, or special education (Rumberger, 1998). For the purposes of this study, the only school changes discussed will be non-educational, high school changes that affect foster youth.

Assembly Bill (AB) 490

Effective January 1, 2004, Assembly Bill 490, introduced by Steinberg, Chapter 862, imposes new duties and rights related to the education of dependents and wards in foster care. Assembly Bill 490 establishes legislative intent that foster youth are ensured access to the same opportunities to meet academic achievement standards to which all students are held, maintain stable school placements, be placed in the least restrictive educational placement and, have access to the same academic resources, services and extracurricular and enrichment activities as all other children. Assembly Bill 490 also makes clear that education and school placement decisions are to be dictated by the best interest of the child. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on the section of the bill that creates school stability for foster children by allowing them to remain in their “school of origin” for the duration of the school year when their placement changes and remaining in
the same school is in the child’s best interests (Children’s Law Center, 2003).

Other California policies will be discussed in Chapter 2.

**School of Origin**

School of Origin is defined as the last school that the foster youth student attended prior to being moved to a new home placement. Under Assembly Bill 490, foster youth have the right to attend their school of origin even if they moved out of school district for the remainder of the school year if it is in the best interest of the student to do so (Children’s Law Center, 2003).

**Basic Needs**

Dr. Glasser referred to Basic Needs as the inherent needs that all humans are born with. He added that there is no hierarchy of needs where some needs are more important than others or that they scaffold in order. An example of this is that some people are willing to endure some pain, even a lot of pain, in order to maintain a relationship because they may believe that “the relationship is more important to us than the suffering” (Glasser, 1998, p. 29). Glasser proposed that needs are the driving force of all human behavior and that every behavior is purposeful to meet one or more of our needs. Unlike Maslow (1943), who proposes that in order to meet one need, a person must first meet one of the basic needs, and once met, work on the next; Glasser believes that all needs are equally important and that the most important need is the one that a person has not yet met at that time.
Survival

According to Choice Theory, Survival is characterized as the Basic Need related to the food, water, shelter, breathing, ability to recognize threats, etc. In his book Control Theory, which later he renamed Choice Theory, Dr. Glasser refers it as the “old brain structures assigned the important task of keeping our necessary body machinery functioning and healthy” (Glasser, 1984).

Power

Power is one of the Basic Needs identified by Choice Theory and is one that Dr. Glasser defines as one “distinctive to humans”. He believes that the need for power is one that early in the human’s life “displaces the need for survival and governs the lives most of us choose to live” (Glasser, 1998, p. 37). He adds that power on its own is neither good or bad; it is the way a person defines it, gets it, and uses it that makes a difference.

Love and Belonging

Glasser identifies Love and Belonging as one of the Basic Needs of human beings related to love, sexual or not, and friendships. Glasser adds that generally for most people, belonging comes easier as the usual struggle is with romantic love (Glasser, 1998, p. 34). For the participants in this study, the researcher believes that foster youth are the ones that do struggle with both, the challenges associated with feeling loved by their family as well as the difficulties with their sense of belonging in a place that may be strange for them with many changes in their home and school environment.
**Quality World**

The concept of Quality World was developed by Glasser and he explains that these are the pictures in our head of people, places, and values that meet one of more of our Basic Needs. These pictures are unique to each individual and are created from birth and continue to be added and edited throughout a person’s life (Glasser, 1998, p. 45).

**Total Behavior**

Total Behavior is the concept in Choice Theory that explains how human behavior is composed of four parts: thinking, acting, feeling, and physiology. These elements are all working together simultaneously and all with the ultimate purpose of meeting one or more of our Basic Needs. Choice Theory believes that all a person “can do, from birth to death, is behave” (Glasser, 1998, p. 71).

**Assumptions and Limitations**

One of the assumptions of the study was that the answers obtained during the interviews were truthful and were not skewed by the perceived need to tell someone (the researcher) what they wanted to hear. Some foster youth may tend to give responses that they perceive may sound “better” or that it would give the researcher they impression that they are “tougher”, “stronger”, “smarter”, or any other response that would not leave them feeling or looking “weak” or “vulnerable”.

While it is not intended to generalize to all other foster youth, this study hopes to provide insight on what successful students perceived, made sense of, and reacted to what they were able to do in order to accomplish their educational goals. In addition, by
utilizing a qualitative design, the researcher hopes to use the foster youth’s voice to inform practitioners and policy-makers in the future.

**Significance of the Study**

Because of constantly changing foster placements, which in turn mean changing school placements, foster youth are often academically behind; and without a healthy amount of confidence, they often do not ask for the needed help to get caught up. These challenges place foster youth in a disadvantage with other students who have had consistency in school placement, students who have been able to make longer-lasting friendships, and students have more history with teachers and administrators. These challenges also reinforce to foster youth the idea that since they are behind in academics, they do not have as many close friends, and adults do not like them as much, thus they are “less than” other children.

According to literature, retention rates in foster youth are as high as 63% in higher grade levels, and retention is positively correlated to drop-out rates, which is also positively correlated to incarceration rates. According to Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000), a significant percentage of foster youth enter the criminal justice system between two to five years from aging-out of foster care.

Approximately 46% of former foster youth complete high school (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009). The significance of this rate is the resulting uneducated workforce and the effects on the local, State and country’s economy. With the difficulties associated with being able to obtain a job that could lead to independent living, many foster youth receive government assistance. This dependence perpetuates
the foster children’s belief that they are not self-sufficient and must rely on others to survive; it lowers their self-esteem, and their self-confidence.

Much of the literature focuses on the plight of foster youth, their challenges, and their limited achievement. The researcher’s intention was to focus the study from a strength-based perspective that highlights the successes of foster youth. This study did not view foster youth as victims but rather as survivors and over-achievers who succeeded despite their challenges and difficulties; as youth who went beyond what was expected of them and who refused to be another statistic.

The challenge was to define success. In this case, the simplest measure of success is completion of high school education. In a way, this is counterintuitive for most practitioners who see small measures of success throughout the process rather than focusing only on the end result. While the researcher, as mental health professional, agrees that being able to recognize and celebrate small successes in the process is a key factor for continued motivation; for the purposes of this study, the end result was the first measure of success.

The central point on this study then becomes being able to document what foster youth believe were those small successes and motivators that led them to the end result. In other words, being able to complete the difficult project in History that was long but with help of her group home staff, she was able to accomplish; or perhaps the long hours of practice in the soccer field that lead to a team win and the sense of belonging that comes from being a part of a sports team. These small pieces of success may lead students to academic engagement and they may find themselves to be motivated to
achieve more than expected. A person who continually fails at something is more likely to stop attempting it. Foster youth have experienced failure in their relationships, in their safety and security needs, in school; but often schools continue to offer the same interventions that have not produced significant success. It is time to listen to foster youth and look at the success stories and see what we can learn and attempt to follow their path.

This study is significant to foster youth, foster youth advocates, foster parents, and other professionals who are formal or informal support systems for foster youth, as it may provide knowledge and understanding of the experience of the participants in this study and their success stories. While these experiences may not be generalizable, they will provide insight and may provide others with ideas and techniques that may assist in the success of other foster youth. Some of these ideas or techniques may turn into procedures or policies that may be implemented in a larger scale and that would affect and even greater number of foster youth. The researcher intends to disseminate the findings of this study to as many agencies or individuals who may benefit from hearing the voice of successful foster youth.

Conclusion

Foster youth have been underserved for many years in the current system of education. Their needs have not been met by a system that has failed to recognize that significant accommodations must be made and policy changes must occur to increase the success rates of foster youth in obtaining a high school education and ideally prepared them to the possibility of higher learning. One of the most significant challenges found
in the literature is the constant changes of home placement which lead to school instability, lack of student identity, inability to connect with significant support systems, and a decreased level of agency. In other words, students who underachieve, have low self-esteem, and believe that cannot amount to much nor can do anything about it.

In this chapter, the researcher has provided an overview of challenges that foster youth face while attempting to obtain a high school education but more detailed account of the research will be provided in Chapter 2. Chapter 2 includes an extensive review on the literature regarding the theoretical framework chosen for this study (Choice Theory), the effects of school mobility, the importance of parental involvement or support system involvement, and the effects to the state and country of having a large portion of its population be under-educated, unprepared for higher education, unskilled workforce, and unprepared for independent living.

In Chapter 3, the methodology for this study is reviewed. The purpose and goal of the chosen methodology and strategy is explained and how this method and strategy helped to reach the participants and ultimately the desired outcomes of the study.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Based on the researcher’s field of study, the areas of review in this section will be school mobility and its effects, the importance of personal connections and relationships in the academic achievement of students, the supports that are currently available for foster youth in school, an overview of Choice Theory and its main concepts, and what attempts has California policy made to address the challenges that foster youth face in school.

The researcher believes that it is important to review different perspectives regarding school mobility in regards of its effects, positive or negative, in assisting student achieve in school. While anecdotally, through the researcher’s professional experience it seems to be that several school moves are negatively impacting the academic achievement of foster youth; the researcher intentionally also sought research that indicates that school moves are positive.

Similarly, much is discussed about the importance of supportive individuals or groups to the success of students in general as well as foster youth. The researcher sought previous studies that demonstrate this importance and how it relates to the academic achievement of foster youth. The review of literature in this study separates the personal connections that foster youth have such as caregivers, social workers, peers, and even natural family members from institutions whose purpose is to assist and address the known challenges that foster youth face.
School Mobility

School mobility can be defined as any changes in school placement for the student whether it was for educational or non-educational reasons. Educational reasons would be graduation or promotion to junior high or high school. Any other reason will be considered non-educational such as low academic achievement, discipline problems, or special education (Rumberger, 1998).

Changes in school have been a topic of research for several years and the research suggests that it highly impacts the academic achievement of students as well as it increases discipline factors. While school mobility is a factor for all students, due to geographic changes in the student’s life, the rate of school mobility is significantly higher for foster children. Foster children are challenged with moving from home to home due to severity and intensity of challenges that they present with. Frerer, Sosenko, and Henke (2013) found that 73% of youth spend two or more years in the foster care system and 69% had three or more home placements with more than half of them being in five or more homes. Often these home placements occur across school districts, cities, counties, and even states; making it difficult for foster youth to stay in the same school thus the significantly high school mobility rates.

School administrators who justify the purpose of school moves explain that school moves are done when students are struggling with either academics or with discipline challenges which they hope to improve by moving them to programs that specialize in addressing those concerns. Ideally, this is an accurate scenario and children with difficult challenges are able to receive the help they need. While this situation may
be true for some, others have found that school moves simply do not help. In a study done by Swanson and Schneider (1999), the authors found that little evidence exists on improved academic achievement when a student changes schools; most often authors have suggested that transferring schools fails to produce measurable academic benefits. In their study, they utilized three educational outcomes: mathematical achievement, behavioral problems, and school drop-out. They found that the students who have a higher likelihood of dropping out early are females, Hispanics, students from a lower socio-economic status, students with parents with lower expectations and less educational involvement, students experiencing behavior problems, foster youth, and teenage parents.

Rumberger (1998) agrees that students who move schools have a higher probability of dropping out of school. His study includes the results of a national longitudinal study that found that “31% of students had changed schools one or more times between 1st and 8th grade” (p. 1), and in a more recent study by the U.S. General Accounting Office, “40% of third graders had changed schools at least two or more times” (p. 2). Rumberger found that in both studies that student mobility was higher among Hispanics, Blacks, Native Americans, foster youth, and poor children. In another study, Engec (2006) found a strong correlation between the increased number of school changes and the decrease in student’s test scores.

These findings are supported by a study done by Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm (2004), “Many of the educational problems they (foster youth) encounter have to do with placement instability and multiple school transfers. Resulting problems from frequent moves and gaps in enrollment include difficulty accumulating school credits, falling
behind in academic skill areas, placement in classes already taken, delay in transfer of school records, and difficulty being evaluated for special education placement” (p. 422). This quote has been significantly accurate as reported by the overwhelming majority of foster youth that the researcher has encountered in 18 years of experience with the foster youth population. These challenges often lead to unmotivated students who get accustomed to failing and who rarely get a taste of success in the educational setting.

Other research highlights the challenges specific to school mobility with foster youth population. Conger (2003) discusses how children in foster care are more likely to transfer schools than the regular population due to the changes in residence. In addition, he found that when the transfer of schools does occur, there are significant delays in re-entry likely due to delays in transfer of needed documents and “in part because many child welfare systems do not systematically monitor the school outcomes of children in care” (p. 97).

Hyde and Kammerer conducted a qualitative study in 2008 with foster youth 16-19 years of age regarding their experiences in care specifically with placement changes. The themes emerging during this study were related to the foster youth’s perspectives on the new placements and the challenges they faced based on relationships that they either did not want or did not feel that they were properly match with a good home. Some of the participants in this study endured up to 19 placement changes which impacted their ability to form positive, long-lasting relationships, and made it more difficult to become independent adults.
In contrast, some research has found positive or no effects of school transfers on academic performance. Alexander, Entwisle, and Dauber (1996) conducted a study tracking a group of elementary school children over a five year period and found no significant decline in academic performance regardless of the amount of school transfers they had. They do point out that inadequate information was studied regarding other important areas such as the home and family environment that prompt students to move. One of the possible explanations could be that a few foster youth who change residential and school placements may have the skills to “start over” and adjust to their new setting. Similarly, Heinlein and Shinn (2000) conducted a longitudinal study in an urban school district in New York and found no significant relation between school transfers and academic achievement but like the study done by Alexander, et al., they did find more significance when children come from homes with multiple levels of challenges and disadvantages and found those children to be more vulnerable to academic performance decrease than other children without or with fewer disadvantages. In both of these studies, while the researchers found no significance in school mobility affecting academic achievement, they both recognized the challenges associated with home and family life, which relate directly to the struggles in the life of a foster youth.

After reviewing the literature on school mobility, the researcher believes that school mobility does negatively impact the academic achievement of foster youth. The rates in which they change home placements coupled with the elevated school mobility rates create a higher risk for foster youth to be unable to develop a strong sense of security based on permanency and consistency of people and places in their life.
research suggests that school mobility with the general population is challenging enough; with higher rates of school mobility and weaker support systems, it would be logical that these same effects will be magnified within the foster youth population.

**Personal Connections and Relationships**

In studies of teacher-child relationships done by Ostrosky and Jung (2007), they found that children who had a secure relationship with their teachers demonstrated good peer interactions and positive relationships with teachers and peers in elementary school. Ostrosky and Jung add that “it is important for teachers to use developmentally and individually appropriate strategies that take into consideration children’s differing needs, interests, styles, and abilities” (p. 2). This statement is even more significant when it involves foster youth whose needs and experiences may be so vastly different than the general population. One study of 10,000 high school students found that positive teacher-child relationships are directly related to improved academic achievement and reduced discipline problems (Crosnoe et al., 2004).

Throughout the research, certain patterns on how foster youth may be affected on their academic achievement, behavioral problems, and parental involvement emerged. According to Boykin and Noguera (2011), a positive teacher-student relationship directly predicts academic achievement. With the constant changes in school, foster youth have a difficult time being able to trust adults in general, and adding the pressure of building a relationship with new teachers may be too big of an expectation.

Parental involvement is another emerging topic in the research that is strongly associated with academic success. This is an area where foster youth will be mostly
affected due to the inconsistent involvement that birth parents have once the child is
removed from their care. While most educators could agree that parental involvement is
a key factor on student’s success, very little evidence points to what type of involvement
and how it is effective. In his study on parental involvement, Jeynes (2003), found that
defining parental involvement would be key to understand its effects. Hoge, Smit and
Crist (1997) attempted to define parental involvement as consisting of four components:
parental expectations, parental interest, parental involvement in school, and family
community. They believed that of the four components, the most important one was
parental expectations. Jeynes suggests that parental involvement is a high predictor of
student achievement. For foster youth, this means that parental involvement could be
defined as birth parents or foster parents. Most practitioners report that they observed a
significant lack of participation from birth parents in the foster youth’s educational
activities. From low attendance to school meetings, to sports activities, or extra-
curricular activities, birth parents, as one could imagine if one considers the reason for
foster placement, are not often involved in their children’s education.

Foster parent’s involvement then becomes pivotal to the academic success of the
children in placement. Their participation and high expectations would demonstrate to
the foster youth a formal support system and a “champion” that every student needs to
succeed. The notion of foster youth being able to count on at least one strong support
system has been rarely researched but has been greatly discussed by many former foster
youth who credit part of their success to people who were present during their struggling
moments.
Another component important in building meaningful relationships is trust. Trust, and its importance, has been researched and discussed in many different forms. For the purposes of this study, the researcher will refer to trust as a highly significant component for foster youth to have the ability to connect with foster parents, teachers, administrators as it relates to their education and academic achievement.

There is established research that validates the importance of trust in schools. Based on this research trust between students, parents, teachers and administrators are significant factors that impact the student’s achievement in school (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). The research also shows that foster youth are a population that often has difficulties with trust in systems in general such as child welfare system, criminal justice system, foster care system, and education system. Unrau (2008) conducted a qualitative study with former foster youth to better understand the experiences of multiple home placements and its impact on adults’ lives. The main theme that she found was mistrust or lacking the ability to trust others which increased the possibility of struggling with mental and behavioral health problems such as hypersensitivity, depression, defensiveness, resisting authority, and criminal behavior. Unrau reported that “many participants spoke about trust issues by describing ways in which they either maintained a level of safe distancing in their interpersonal relationships with others, or lived loner or transient lifestyles, which involved moving often in their adult lives and consequently not connecting to others” (p.1262).

Defining trust is a challenging task and the literature has shown us that it is often described by multiple descriptors and values. Romero (2014) discuses that the most
common descriptors of trust cited in the literature are benevolence, competence, and integrity; thus the literature “defines trust as the willingness to be vulnerable to another person, group, or organization based on the perception that the trusted party is benevolent, competent, and behaves with integrity” (p. 3). Putnam (1993) defined trust as “social capital” that can be built, quantified, saved, and even exchanged for goods. When trust exists between people in the school community, teachers, students, parents, and administrators, schools improve and students achieve more (Hoy et al., 1992; Tarter et al., 1995).

With the foster youth population especially, building a trusting environment is a significant factor to the success of the student. This environment must be built with strong interpersonal relationships (Hoy et al., 1996; Tarter et al., 1989, 1995) and shared decision-making and values (Smylie and Hart, 1999). Foster youth must have a voice in their educational process and be considered a partner in the decision-making process.

Another study with foster youth revealed a theme of a sense of powerlessness which can be linked to Romero’s findings on trust. Foster youth reported that they feel that the adults in their life often do not know what their needs are (Competence), or that decisions are made during meetings where they are not present (Benevolence and Integrity). The researcher stated that “the powerlessness of children in foster care is dramatically increased when knowledge and information about their future is withheld” (Bruskas, 2008, p. 74).

Trust is also a key component in being able to build strong relationships. For a population that often struggles with building interpersonal connections due to the
struggles associated with trauma that some have experienced, foster youth especially need to be in a supportive and caring environment where they can grow personally and academically.

Support Systems Available

As mentioned in the previous sections, foster youth are at significant risk of low educational attainment, homelessness, unemployment, mental health difficulties, need for public assistance, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Participation in Independent Living Skills Programs (ILSP) has been one of the main strategies utilized by agencies to support foster youth and provide them with essential information on life skills and personal development. The effectiveness of ILSPs was studied by Montgomery, Donkoh and Underhill in 2006, who in their conclusions found no strong evidence that ILSPs were essential to the success of most youth who voluntarily and actively participate in the program.

In contrast, Washington (2012) recommended that participation on ILSP should be mandatory since it was proven to be helpful to the participants in her study as it provided them with critical information regarding community resources on issues like “housing, emancipation, health, employment, and early parenting.” It appears to the researcher that Washington’s study seems to be more focused on the relationship that was formed between the foster youth and the ILSP worker, mentor, or educational liaison, rather than the effectiveness of the program itself. This supports many theories, including this researcher’s hypothesis, that the most effective agent of long-lasting change relies on the strength of the relationship formed with the foster youth.
Other support systems available are the school district’s Foster Youth Services. California established a statewide system to ensure that educational support services were available to every foster youth in the state. The program recognizes that foster youth are often impacted by the trauma experienced as a result of neglect, physical, or sexual abuse; and have difficulties adjusting to new residential and school placements that may diminish their ability to meet educational expectations. These challenges may be overwhelming and may hinder the student’s ability to learn. Foster Youth Programs work collaboratively with schools, child welfare agencies, foster family agencies, caregivers, and other formal or informal supports identified by the foster youth. The services they provide vary from advocacy to expedite transfer of records and placement in proper classes; additional support for struggling students; and forums for collaboration with all support systems involved. Participation in these services is voluntary but disclosure of the student’s status as a foster youth is needed for enrollment in the school, which then triggers a referral to the Foster Youth Services program. This program is another example of support services provided for foster youth that are intimately dependent on the relationship that exists between the adult provider and the foster youth. Much like any other programs, the design of the program has significant benefits for the student, but it is dependent on the individual worker carrying the case. Most foster youth report caring and competent workers who have helped them navigate the system, but some mention workers who did not seem to care or did not understand the student’s needs.
Another support available for foster youth are advocacy groups, either independent or government run. The California Ombudsman for Foster Care is the state office designed to advocate for the needs of foster youth. The primary goal is to have a place where the voice of foster youth is heard as well as a place for foster youth to launch personal right complaints regarding their placement. Independent groups such as the California Youth Connection (CYC) are vital to the development of new policy and changes in practice. CYC is a youth-led organization that helps develop strong leaders that take the charge of transforming the foster care system through legislative reform. CYC co-sponsored the California Fostering Connections to Success Act, Assembly Bill 12, which provides an option for foster youth to voluntarily stay in care up to their 20th birthday.

Participation in these types of advocacy groups is voluntary and the participants that engage appear to receive significant benefits in areas of self-development and especially by feeling heard rather than powerless or invisible. The reality is that while many foster youth state that they are eager to participate and promote change in the system, few of them follow-through with the needed commitment to actively be involved in the process of change. This is easy to understand when you consider the challenges they face for self-care; the concept of doing advocacy work for others may seem too much for them to handle. Fostering the idea of service to others is a great concept in theory but one must understand the limitations of this population.
Choice Theory

Choice Theory has been widely utilized in different areas of treatment. The most common area is the counseling area where the use of Choice Theory concepts is translated into the practice of Reality Therapy (Glasser, 1998, p. 117). In business, Choice Theory has been used internationally under the concept of Lead Management (Glasser, 1998, p.289). Lastly, in the school setting, Choice Theory is implemented by what Glasser calls Quality Schools (1998, p. 234). It is the concept of Glasser Quality Schools (GQS) and its components that will be reviewed in this chapter.

Choice Theory suggests that because all a person can do is behave, in other words, make choices, and the only person that one can control is one’s self, no one can control another person’s behaviors. This is an important concept in order to eliminate external control and coercion from our schools.

There is an extensive body of literature regarding how giving students choices appears to positively improve academic success, performance, learning, and willingness to complete challenging tasks (Cordova & Lepper, 1996; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Patall et al., 2008). But Choice Theory goes well beyond the classroom and it suggests that teaching students and teachers to use Choice Theory in their life will not only improve their academic achievement but also their long-term relationships and their overall quality of life.

According to Choice Theory, one of the most significant challenges within our school system is what Glasser called “Schooling”, which he defined as two main practices: one practice is that students are made to remember facts that have no value to
them or the real world; and the second practice is that even if the knowledge has some value to the students, it does not have enough value to force someone to learn it (Glasser, 1998). Choice Theory suggests that most schools practice external control to force students do what otherwise they would not do. Choice Theory also suggests that coercion is one of the main strategies used in school by teachers and administrators; by making students believe that if they do not comply, they will be punished. The proposed solution, from a Choice Theory framework, is to get rid of the practice of schooling and promote learning; and the first step on his process is to redefine education as follows: “education is not acquiring knowledge; it is best defined as using knowledge” (Glasser, 1998, p. 238). Glasser added that most students who do their best work and endeavor to achieve the most often have both the activity and the teacher in their Quality World (Glasser, 1998).

In his book, The Quality School (1992), Glasser discussed the difficulties and challenges of teaching without using coercion or external control. Glasser defined an effective teacher as someone who “is able to convince not half or three quarters but essentially all of his or her students to do quality work in school” (Glasser, 1992, p. 16). Choice Theory promotes the idea that schools should teach students in cooperative groups. “Learning as a member of a small learning team is much more need-satisfying, especially to the needs for power and belonging, than learning individually” (Glasser, 1992, p. 50).

While this study does not have any direct connection with the Glasser Quality School system, the researcher included a review of the literature as a successful model of
education. Since the aim of the study is to look at what successful students have done, the Choice Theory model provides with one example of what a school can do to promote success with their student population. Glasser identified six criteria of Glasser Quality Schools: Relationships are based on trust and respect; Total Learning Competence is stressed by learning useful content; All students do Quality Work; Students and staff are taught and use Choice Theory; Students do better on state academic tests and college entrance exams; and the school is viewed as a Joyful Place. (Glasser, 1998, p. 282)

Literature on the importance of relationships was already discussed earlier in this chapter. Developing a supportive and caring environment, or what Choice Theory identifies as a Joyful Place, is a key factor in the success of students in school. Limited research was found in regards to “joy” in the educational environment. This researcher was able to find only one study done by Goodland in 1984 where he questioned “why are our schools not places of joy?” His study included data from over 27,000 students in 38 schools that showed that “less than 3% of classroom time is devoted to praise or expressions of joy” (1984, p. 229-230). Goodland’s study refers to this concept of Joyful Place as “school climate”; which has been researched extensively and has been identified as a factor that impacts academic achievement.

School climate has been identified, in recent years, as an area that educational leaders need to consider for significant education reform. Research on school climate suggests that transformational leaders, specifically school principals, are the main persons responsible and have the most impact on positive school climate which is linked to improved student outcomes (Leithwood and Jantzi, 1990). A healthy school climate has
been defined by Hoy as humanistic and open in nature (2012). Hoy suggests that humanistic orientation refers to authentic, supportive, respectful, and trusting interactions between administrators, teachers, students, and parents. This concept is closely related to the benevolence concept discussed earlier where students believe that their teachers and principals have their best interest and believe in their capabilities of accomplishing their educational goals. Open in nature refers to having clear and realistic expectations and being authentic and transparent about them. While Hoy’s definition of school climate does not include the mention of “joy”, this researcher believes that Hoy’s notion of school climate is clearly aligned with Choice Theory’s idea of school being a joyful place. Foster youth enter care with a variety of challenges such as mistrust, neglect, trauma, abuse, and/or others; in this joyful environment, foster youth would grow and flourish in the personal arena which would allow them the opportunity to grow academically.

Another criteria that Glasser identifies as needed for a quality school, is Total Learning Competence. Earlier in this chapter the concept of education was discussed from the Choice Theory framework perspective as using knowledge rather than simply acquiring it. Knowledge is to be useful, to be applied, and to be meaningful; for that to be true, Glasser believed that schools must eliminate “schooling” and be concerned with learning; he argued that the real world needs competence, not passing grades (Glasser, 2000). Under this criteria, quality schools have eliminated lower grades and allow students to re-do their work until competence (grades A or B) has been achieved. These opportunities are essential for foster youth to be in an environment where they will be
assessed by their efforts and willingness to learn and not by their past failures. A number of institutions of higher education, such as Brown University, have adopted this grading concept. At Brown University, students have a choice to receive a Pass/No Pass or choose a letter grade but no Ds or Fs are recorded (Brown University, 2014).

Choice Theory suggests that competency is the standard of student academic achievement and promotes that every student in a quality school can do work significantly beyond competency. The expectation that students can do quality work has been defined as academic optimism by many researchers. Hoy et al., (2006) defined academic optimism as a combination of academic emphasis, collective efficacy, and faculty trust. In an environment where these factors exist, foster youth students would be more confident in their abilities and teachers would be confident in their ability to teach students and work collaboratively with each other and with administration. Much is discussed about the challenges that foster youth face and often low expectations are placed on them; if trust and optimism was placed on them, foster youth may, once again, demonstrate with quality work the high levels of resiliency that has characterized them in other areas.

The last criteria identified as a component of a Glasser Quality School is that students do better on state academic tests and in college entrance exams which has been difficult for the foster youth population as approximately half of California foster youth scored in the lower two out of five levels of performance (Frerer et al., 2013).

According to Choice Theory, all human beings have five basic needs, survival (food, water, shelter, safety), love and belonging (connections, love, relationships), power
(pride, success, recognition, accomplishments), freedom (autonomy, choice, liberty) and fun (joyful activities, learning, laughter). For the purposes of this dissertation study, the researcher focused on three out of the five basic needs in Choice Theory: Survival, Love and Belonging and Power. The Survival need is related to the basic areas that help a person be well and function. These are areas that may be unconscious or also referred as “old brain” structures that instinctually help us breath, sweat, release adrenaline when needed, etc. Based on the situation that they are in, foster youth often struggle with survival as they have been removed from the care of his/her biological or adoptive parents due to neglect or physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. In some situations, parents who adopt children find themselves in a position where they may have to consider returning the children to the system either for personal reasons or due to extreme behaviors exhibited by the children. Regardless of the reason why foster children enter the system, they often experience constant home placement changes which make it difficult to for the child to know whether they will be kept in a safe environment; whether they will be fed properly and adequately, or even whether the will suffer more abuse or neglect by their new caregivers. All of these challenges negatively impact the child’s ability to meet their survival need.

Love and Belonging is the need related to romantic love and friendships. For foster youth this is even more significant as the important people in their lives are, or may be, the ones that abused or neglected them. Being able to build meaningful, long-lasting relationships is a challenge for most foster youth and the school system has not been much different for them where often they feel invisible and adults focus on their
challenges rather than their strengths. During this study, the researcher focused on the significant person or people who engaged, supported, empowered, and encouraged foster youth during their educational journey.

According to Choice Theory, power is characterized by accomplishments, achievements, and recognition and, as aforementioned, power is neither positive nor negative but it is rather how it is acquired and used (Glasser, 1998). In school, a student who is feeling powerful as he is able to achieve a high grade in a difficult course does not negatively impact other students’ grades. In contrast, a student who achieves a high grade by forcing others to do his work, directly impacts the learning of others. For the participants in this study, a sense of accomplishment, achievement, and recognition were significant factors on their desire to meet the power need and behave accordingly to satisfy it.

Total Behavior is a concept in Choice Theory that suggests that all behavior has four inseparable components: acting, thinking, feeling, and the physiology associated with such behavior (Glasser, 1998, p. 72). According to Choice Theory, all total behavior is purposeful and is aimed at satisfying one or more of our Basic Needs. A person can only directly control the acting and thinking components but can indirectly control the feeling and physiology components through the way a person acts and thinks. A person’s experiences, beliefs, and values would create a picture of what one believes are need-satisfying wants. These wants lead a person to make choices that he or she believes will be meet any one or more of the basic needs. To illustrate this concept, Figure 2 shows us a picture of a car that represents the Total Behavior concept where
each tire is one of the four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. The car’s engine represents the Basic Needs and the steering wheel represents the Wants. For this illustration to be accurate, this car must be a front wheel-drive whereas the two front wheels are the acting and thinking components. Once the driver has chosen the desired direction, the two wheels in the back (representing the feeling and physiology components) will follow.

Choice Theory, as is the case for every other theoretical framework, presents some challenges since there is no theory that “fits all”. The main tenants of Choice Theory are choosing our own behavior and the importance of personal responsibility. It is within these concepts that most critiques come from. Many questions arise from the idea that if all behavior is chose, how can individuals choose to be unhappy or to be miserable? Detractors of Choice Theory argue that Choice Theory ignores the biological factors that play a part in mental illness and some individuals who suffer from mental illnesses are left feeling blame that they are choosing these conditions. This assertion could not be more untrue. Choice Theory would rather be a tool to empower an individual to understand that while our history determines who we are now, no matter
what the current circumstances are, the individual has the power to choose behaviors that will impact their future. In addition, Choice Theory recognizes that in cases when individuals, such as the case of many of foster youth, who have experienced past trauma, may be reliving stress or pain associated with the traumatic event; under those circumstances, Choice Theory views each event as a current event and interventions would focus on addressing these current symptoms.

Choice Theory places a significant amount of emphasis on relationship building and the importance of interpersonal relations as the main source of happiness. Two of the “Ten Axioms of Choice Theory” are “all long-lasting psychological problems are relationship problems” and “the problem relationship is always a part of the present life”. Choice Theory proposes that people have a tendency to develop, and get very good at, behavioral habits; some of these habits are connecting habits and some disconnecting habits. In other words, some of these habitual behaviors help us get closer to the people we care about and want to get along with; and some other habits send us further away. Choice Theory calls these habits the Seven Connecting Habits (caring, trusting, listening, supporting, negotiating, befriending, and encouraging) and the Seven Deadly Habits (criticizing, blaming, complaining, nagging, threatening, punishing, and rewarding to control) (Glasser, 2002, p. 13-14).

**Current Policy Attempting to Address Foster Youth Challenges in School**

The state of California, over the past few years and with the lobbying efforts of foster youth advocacy groups, has recognize the need to create policy that addresses the concerns of school mobility. Assembly Bills have been introduced and enacted to protect
foster youth from continuously falling behind on credits by regulating how quickly foster youth get enrolled in new schools and how they remain in schools of origin for the remainder of their school year regardless of home placement changes.

Assembly Bill 490 regulates that placement agencies must consider the proximity of the foster youth’s school of origin, which is often the youth’s current school, in order to promote school stability. Assembly Bill 490 also stipulates that foster youth should attend the local public school setting unless otherwise determined by the foster youth’s Individual Educational Plan. Assembly Bill 490 requires that foster youth are enrolled in schools immediately and it regulates the timely transfer of foster youth educational records to assure for continuity of care to the new school. Assembly Bill 490 also stipulates that schools may not lower a foster youth’s grades for absences due to placement changes, or any other court ordered activities. In addition, schools must award full or partial credit for all activities completed by foster youth while enrolled in the school (Children’s Law Center, 2003).

One of the challenges that this bills faces is that it depends on enforcement for it to be effective. Adequate training must be provided across the board for students, teachers, administrators, social workers, foster parents, foster youth advocates, attorneys, and any other formal or informal support system in the life of the foster youth. There are many reports from foster youth who were simply not aware that this bill was in place.

Another challenge faced by Assembly Bill 490 was the definition of “school of origin”. In theory, this idea was well formulated but in practice, many schools were able to circumvent this by stating that staying in the school of origin was not beneficial for the
foster youth, based on the youth’s grades or behavior challenges. Furthermore, remaining in the school of origin was only for the remainder of the school year, which meant more school changes and continued instability.

In 2010, California passed Assembly Bill 1933, which expanded Assembly Bill 490 for foster youth to remain in their school of origin “for the duration of the jurisdiction of the court” and added that foster youth were entitled to have the “benefit of matriculating with [their] peers in accordance with established school feeder patterns of school districts”. In other words, foster youth students now have the right not only stay in their elementary school for as long as they are in care, but also to attend the middle school and high school that most of their peers would attend, even if they are in a different school district.

Assembly Bill 167 is another bill aimed at assisting foster youth with services needed to complete their high school education. Under Assembly Bill 167, foster youth are able to obtain a high school diploma, under certain guidelines, with a reduced number of credits by adopting the California’s basic standards as opposed to local school district’s standards. To be eligible for Assembly Bill 167, the student must have been placed in foster care after 2010; must have transferred schools in the 11th or 12th grade; meet the California required course work and pass the California high school exit exam; and the district must find that the student would not be able to complete the additional graduation requirements prior to leaving foster care (CFYETF, 2010).

While opposition to this bill argue that the expectations were being lower and that the high school diploma would “lose” value in the higher education arena; proponents
suggest that it opens up other doors for foster youth who do not intend to go to college but rather wish to learn a trade or vocation where a high school diploma is part of the minimum requirements.

Not enough data is present, nor enough years in effect have passed, to assess whether these bills, or its amendments, have helped the educational attainment of foster youth since their passing. This is an area where further studies are needed to see the effectiveness of these bills.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

Chapter 3 provides the structure of the methodology used in order to conduct this study. This chapter includes information in the following areas: the research design, the role of the researcher, the researcher questions, setting, population and sample, data collection and instrumentation, data analysis, and the protection of the participants.

This chapter aims to inform the reader the reasoning behind the chosen methodology and strategies used and why they are the best ones to be able to obtain the desired results and meet the purpose of this study.

Research Design

A qualitative research method study was utilized in order to gather data provided by participants and their narratives of their successful experiences in the completion of their high school education. The focus of the study is to collect commonalities in best practices that the participants reported were helpful in meeting their educational goals. Through this method the researcher aims at finding understanding on how participants interpret their experience in high school while placed in foster care, how they construct their worldview based on that experience, and what meaning they attribute to these experiences; rather than predicting possible outcomes, explaining cause and effect, or generalizing to the larger population (Merriam, 2009).

This dissertation is a multi-case study of six participants who share their stories of success in completing their high school education while living in a foster or group home.
Conducting a multi-case study provides data from multiple sources which make the study richer and more robust than a single-case study. Replication logic (Yin, 1994, p. 45) was considered as the researcher used a purposeful sampling of participants who met the design criteria and found six cases that were rare and provided an opportunity for literal replication as similar results may be predicted.

Phenomenology is another qualitative research strategy chosen for this study as it reflects the thorough descriptions of human experiences by the participants (Creswell, 2009). The researcher chose this method and strategy because of the interest in the participant’s voice and own experiences; as Merriam (2009) describes, “phenomenology is the study of people’s conscious experiences of their life-world, that is, their everyday life and social action” (p. 25). This statement is congruent to the Choice Theory framework that states that all behaviors are purposeful, in other words conscious, and aimed at meeting one or more of your needs (Glasser, 1998).

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is a licensed marriage and family therapist who serves as the deputy director for a group home and foster family agency. Throughout seventeen years in this field, the researcher has worked mainly with teenage girls working towards one of three outcomes: emancipations from foster care system, reunification with natural or adoptive family, or graduating the program and moving to a lower level of care. In either case, most hope to complete high school but statistics show that approximately only one of three foster youth actually does. There are many thoughts and beliefs as to why this is the case but this study is aimed at identifying those few that are one of the three who
successfully complete high school, understanding, from their perspective, what their experiences were in this process, what meaning they make of these experiences, what did they do to be successful, and how those choices are related to their basic needs as they see them. There is extensive literature on foster care statistics that show the limitations and challenges they face; it is the goal of this study to focus on the success stories, and provide a strength-based approach that would inspire others to make similar choices in their pursuit to high school completion.

The researcher will conduct all interviews face-to-face in order to be fully present with observational notes and voice recordings to ensure that no part of the interview was missed. Researcher will transcribe the interviews himself and later read the transcriptions for data analysis and meaning making. This data collection and data analysis process is aligned to the idea that the researcher is the primary instrument. During the interviews, this idea is even more significant by using semi-structured questions combined with the interviewing skills from a professional therapist, because it allows for the opportunity to analyze non-verbal inferences, process and clarify information immediately, and check with participants for accurate interpretation (Merriam, 2009).

Some of the limitations of qualitative research described in the literature include the human instrument due to biases and misinterpretation. As a professional therapist, the researcher has received intensive training on interviewing techniques, on observational methods of analysis, on setting aside biases, verbal and non-verbal communication, and other challenges that may negatively impact the study. These skills
could prove to be particularly helpful due to the nature of the questions during the interview could remind the participants of a difficult time in their past.

**Research Questions**

This study includes two main questions:

1. What are adults’ perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

2. What are adults' perceptions regarding their focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

**Setting, Population and Sample**

According to the 2013 AFCARS Report, there are approximately 400,000 foster children placed in foster care in the United States and nearly 100,000 in California alone; of those 2,570 live in Sacramento County. There are a number of agencies providing services in Sacramento County with foster homes and a few different levels of group homes. Group home levels refer to the level of care provided to their clients, specifically, the higher the group home level, the more challenging the behaviors from the foster child.

The study will focus on adult participants who obtained a high school diploma in the past four years while being placed either in a group home or a foster home. The importance of this criterion is to identify success stories as well as to identify possible best practices from a strength-based perspective, as opposed to a deficiency view.

The researcher seeks to identify what has worked for successful foster youth in their pursuit of high school education. The reasoning behind the researcher’s choice of sampling type is best described by Merriam (2009) as she notes that purposeful sampling
directly reflect the purpose of the study and guide in the identification of information-rich cases.

**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The researcher received the assistance of group home and foster home agencies to access the desired population. Within the agency where the researcher is employed, the researcher asked the Executive Director, who in collaboration with the special education school principal, group home administrators, and foster family agency social workers, to provide the invitation letter and the informed consent to potential participants who meet the criteria of the study and instructions of how to contact the researcher if the youth wished to participate in the study. The youth may be a graduate from the agency’s school or any other community high school. The researcher contacted all participants who responded to the invitation letter and discussed expectations over the phone and answered any questions that the potential participants had. The researcher requested that the youth who wish to participate read and signs the informed consent and returns it during the first interview, if scheduled. Convenience sampling method was utilized by the researcher in contacting participants who responded to the invitation, met the criteria established by the researcher, and who were available to meet and participate in the study.

The interviews were conducted either at the participant’s residential facility or at the researcher’s office as determined by participant’s preference. The interviews were conducted in a private office setting where distractions are minimized. The researcher set the environment to be conducive to a comfortable and non-threatening interview. The researcher is a California licensed marriage and family therapist who has received
intensive formal classroom and practical training on several types of interviewing, including motivational interviewing, informational interviewing, and emotional interviewing.

During the first meeting, the researcher reviewed with the participant the purpose of the study and the expectations of both the researcher and the participant. This discussion allowed for the opportunity to answer any questions that the participant had regarding the study or what his or her role may be. The researcher discussed with the participant the interest of the researcher on this topic, the research questions, and the methods of how he will approach the study. The researcher also reviewed with the participant the way data will be collected, issues of confidentiality, how the data will be kept and secured, and the risks involved.

A short demographic survey was given to the participants in order to obtain basic information regarding his or her home and school placement. The purpose of the demographic survey is for the researcher to be able to identify possible historical similarities regarding the reason and age of the participants when they entered foster placement, the number of homes and schools attended, the level of education of the participants’ biological or adoptive and foster parents, and his or her participation in support programs like Independent Living Skills Programs.

Face-to-face interviews lasting 45 to 60 minutes were conducted utilizing semi-structured questions. Interviews were voice recorded to ensure that the interview report is accurate and complete information is recorded. The researcher, in addition, took interview notes in order to document researcher insights and reduce possible challenges
such as tape recorder malfunction or the researcher losing track of the interview questions (Opdenakker, 2006).

The questions were developed prior to the interviews and focus on asking for participant’s stories and narratives about their high school experiences. Questions were designed to elicit participant’s meanings of their own experiences as well as to provoke some thinking about what effective choices of behavior they made and what support systems were essential for them to accomplish their goals. Based on participant’s answers, follow-up questions were asked to get into deeper meanings as well as to clarify their responses. The benefit to using this method of interviewing is that it “allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the merging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 2009, p. 90).

The following is the list of questions and possible follow-up questions that was asked of the participants during the face-to-face interview (See Appendix C for sample copy):

- Can you tell me a story when you felt good about a project in school?
  - Was the grade that you received in the project important?
  - What was so different from other projects?
- Do you remember a class that you looked forward to go to?
  - Was the course material interesting to you?
  - What was your relationship with the teacher in that class?
  - Do you remember the information from that class?
- Can you tell me about a person you think was the most helpful to your success?
  - In what way were they important?
  - Can you describe him/her?
• Is there a time when you taught someone to do something?
  o What was that experience like?
  o Did you accomplish what you wanted?
  o How important was it for you that he/she/they learned?
• What was most helpful to you during high school?
• What was challenging about high school?
  o What would have helped you be more successful?
  o Were you able to overcome the challenges? If so, how?
• What advantages or disadvantages did/do you think foster youth have in being successful in high school?

Based on the answers provided by the participants, the researcher asked follow-up questions hoping to elicit even deeper understanding on themes related to this study. For example, if a participant responds to what was helpful during high school with an answer related to receiving support, the researcher would ask questions related to what type of support and how that support made a difference in their success. Further questions would be related to seek rich and meaningful meanings to the participant’s experience. A variation of close-ended and open-ended questions would be used based on the information given by the participant.

Member-checking, also called “respondent validation” (Merriam, 2009, p.217), measures were implemented to strengthen the accuracy, reliability and validity of instrumentation and design. This measure is an important tool to reduce the risk of misinterpreting what the participants say or do during the interview process (Merriam, 2009). After interviews were transcribed, the researcher emailed the participants and sent them a copy of the transcribed interviews for clarification of content and meaning. Seven
days were given to the participants to send back feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the transcripts. This way, the participants had an opportunity to affirm the information received as accurate and complete, or to inform the researcher that the information does not reflect his or her experience, and that he or she wanted to have something changed, deleted, or added. Any changes that the participant wished to change, delete, or add were honored.

Another validity strategy utilized by this researcher was to provide rich and robust descriptions to discuss the findings. According to Creswell (2009), rich descriptions will enable the readers to “experience” the study and will help the results become more real (p. 192).

**Data Analysis**

The researcher will utilize the open-code method of data analysis. The researcher will transcribe the narratives collected during interviews and subsequently review the transcriptions. During this review, data will be analyzed by the researcher to seek for the participants’ meaning of their educational experiences in foster care placement and emerging themes will be highlighted. Interview notes taken by the researcher will also be open coded and themes will be identified and compared with the themes found in the transcripts from the interviews. Both the interview transcripts and the researcher notes will be open-coded separately for emerging themes and later compared to extract the themes for the entire group. This method is supported by Merriam (2009) who suggests that in qualitative research, the researcher is the primary tool for data collection and analysis.
Using the constant comparative method of data analysis, the researcher will then search for key words that could reflect patterns and/or themes that suggest a level of significance to the study. The researcher will look for similarities and differences and categorize the data in groups, which later will become the themes (Merriam, 2009). These themes will then be identified and supported by the narratives from the participants’ interviews.

The patterns and/or themes will be sub-categorized as themes related to Glasser’s concept of Total Behaviors (Thoughts, Actions, Feelings, or Physiology) and themes related to Glasser’s concept of Basic Needs (Survival, Fun, Freedom, Power, or Love & Belonging). The themes categorized as related to Basic Needs, will be related to research question # 1, and the themes categorized as related to Total Behaviors will be related to research question # 2.

**Protection of Participants**

The researcher plans to use several measures to protect the participants from any harm caused by the study. First, the Informed Consent sent with the invitation to participate will have an area where the participant can choose a pseudo-name to be used from that point forward. The Informed Consent will be saved in a password protected database that only the researcher has access to. By using this pseudo-name, the researcher protects the anonymity of the participant while it keeps the personal touch instead of using a participant number.

The researcher will send invitations only by email or regular mail in order to avoid the face-to-face pressure that could exist when wanting to decline to participate.
For those who respond to the invitation, the researcher will once again discuss the importance of voluntary participation and the ability to withdraw from participation at point in the study.

   All documents containing data obtained from interviews, whether it is voice recordings, transcribed interviews, or findings, will be password protected using the WinZip application with the researcher being the only person who has access to them. Three years after the study is complete, all data related to the study will be deleted.
ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

"I have voice. I am a voice. You can't stop me. My voice is meaningful. I mean something. I'm worth it. I'm loved. I'm cared about. You can't stop what I'm going to do. You can't stop me from going to school. You can't stop me from taking my AP test. You can't stop me from making friends. You can't stop me from working. You can't stop me from going to college. There's nothing that can hold me back because I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Sara, 2015)

Qualitative Data

The process of data collection started with the researcher obtaining permission from the Executive Director of Atkinson Family Services to recruit participants for the dissertation study. The Executive Director assisted the researcher by asking agency administrators, social workers, and the special education school principal to pass along the researcher’s invitation to participate in the dissertation study. Along with the invitation, the agency staff would also pass along the informed consent form and the researcher’s contact information for the willing participants to connect with the researcher. By following this process, the researcher reduced the possibility of any participant feeling pressure to participate in the dissertation study due to the researcher’s position in the agency as the Deputy Director. The researcher received exactly six phone calls or emails from potential participants who were interested in participating. The researcher contacted all six of them and was able to conduct interviews with all of them. Three of the participants were invited by social workers from the foster family division and three were invited by administrators from the group home division of the agency.
The participants, three females and three males, were contacted by the researcher who scheduled face-to-face interviews. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher reviewed the expectations of the participant in the study and discussed the informed consent (See Appendix A for a copy of the Informed Consent).

The participants also completed a demographic survey that contained information regarding their placement type, their age at the time of entering foster care placement, the length of time in foster care placement, and other information pertinent to foster care and high school education experiences (See Appendix B for a copy of the Demographic Survey). The purpose of collecting this information was for the researcher to be able to factor whether any of these experiences had significance on the educational outcomes among the participants.

Starting with placement types, foster homes and group homes are very different. A foster home is considered to be a home where foster youth are placed after removal from their biological or adoptive parents and has some expectation that if reunification is not possible, a long-term plan for permanency can be obtained in foster homes. The goal in all levels of foster care is to keep the child or youth in the lowest level of care. Foster homes are the lowest level of care possible and they function in the same way that any typical family would, with parents and siblings. They do have State and County regulations that they have to follow but essentially, they look and feel like a typical family home.

As mentioned previously in the literature review, parental involvement can be a key factor in the success of students. Thus, the role of foster parents is also a key factor
as they are the caregivers for foster youth in lieu of their biological or adoptive parents. Being able to stay in a consistent placement for longer periods of time is quite significant as the foster parents and the foster youth are able to build rapport and form a supportive caring relationship and the foster parents will become the foster youth’s strongest advocates on achieving their educational goals.

Group homes are not meant to be a regular home, they are meant to be a transitional place where children and youth have the structure and access to supportive services due to their higher emotional and behavioral needs. There are several levels of group homes from Level 10 to Level 14; Level 10 being the lowest level of care and Level 14 the highest, more restrictive, level of care. The higher the level, the more supervision and services are to be provided for the foster children and/or youth. Most group homes function solely with employees who are on-site 24 hours per day, every day of the year. Some function with a set of “house parents” who keep the family-style model and attempt to keep the home as comfortable as possible.

Since the group home system, by design, is meant to be a temporary placement with the ultimate goal of moving foster children and youth to a lower level of care, the ability to form long lasting relationships occurs with less frequency. The foster children and youth have less chance to form connections with group home employees who may change employment often for a variety of reasons. If one factors in that foster youth experience a high number of foster care placements (According to a study funded by the Stuart Foundation in 2013, 69% of foster youth have lived in more than three foster care placements; 38% in more than five foster care placements), the number of caregivers
and/or employees that foster youth encounter can be astounding, which can potentially create a low level of trust towards the many adults in a youth’s life.

Another difference reported by participants is the level of “normalcy” in foster care placements:

*(Foster care) is worse in a way if you’re in a group home. If you’re in a group home, it’s hard as shit, because you have to deal with... between one to five other girls under the same roof, all teenagers in high school. Every single one of them have their own drama, their own baggage they’re carrying...Foster care, if you have a good foster parent, it’s like a regular kid, except for a little bit of background history. It’s like a normal teenager, except they have a few extra things they’ve got to work through.* (Jayden, 2015)

The following is a table that shows the participant’s foster care placement types, their length of time in the foster care system, and the number of foster care placements:

Table 1
Placement Type, Length, and Number of Placements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Type of Foster Care Placement</th>
<th>Years in Foster Care Placement</th>
<th>Number of Foster Care Placements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Both Foster Homes and Group Homes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td>Both Foster Homes and Group Homes</td>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Foster Homes only</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1-2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>Both Foster Homes and Group Homes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>Both Foster Homes and Group Homes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Both Foster Homes and Group Homes</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All the participants in the study, with the exception of one, Eric, were placed in both foster and group homes. The 2014 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) report shows that as of September 30, 2013, 75% of foster youth were placed in foster family homes, either in relative or non-relative homes, and only 6% of foster youth were placed in group homes. Based on those statistics, the participants were part of that low percentage of youth living in group homes, which makes their educational achievement more significant. While the researcher was unable to find reports that indicated specifically whether foster youth completed high school either in a foster home or a group home, it is the researcher’s hypothesis, based on eighteen years of professional experience in both foster homes and group homes, that completion rates for youth in group home care are extremely low.

Typically, youth in group home care are placed due to more severe emotional or behavioral challenges; these challenges make it even more difficult for them to be future goal-oriented as they adjust to day-to-day challenges related to survival needs and other mental health needs. Research suggests that nearly 46% of foster children may be identified with having mental health needs (Sullivan & Van Zy, 2008) and one quarter of the foster youth had a disability compared to less than 10% of the general population (Frerer, 2013).

Another significant factor to be noted is the number of years the participants were placed in the foster care system. All participants with the exception of Edena, who did not respond, were placed in the foster care system for over five years; half of all participants were placed in the foster care system for over ten years. Based on the
AFCARS report (2014), these numbers are typical as they report that 73% of foster youth spend two or more years in the foster care system.

Number of foster placements was observed to be significant. All participants, with the exception of Michael who reported more than ten foster care placements, reported that they were placed in three to five foster care placements. These numbers are closely aligned to the numbers from the report funded by the Stuart Foundation (2013) where they found that 62% of youth in foster care have had fewer than five foster care placements.

The demographic survey requested information regarding the participant’s age at the time of entering the foster care system as well as their current age:

Table 2
Participant’s Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age at the time of Entering Foster Care Placement</th>
<th>Current Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td>Did not respond</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age of the foster youth at the time of entering the foster care system is significant based on level of adjustment to placement. The longer a child is in placement,
the more institutionalized they become. There is an extensive body of research that suggests that children who live in institutions are more likely to experience delays in their development as well as behavior and/or emotional challenges. In a study from the University of Pittsburgh, children who moved from institutions to a more permanent home environment, either in an adoptive home or a “high quality foster home”, demonstrated physical and behavioral growth soon after the move and then became attached to their new caregivers (2012).

Foster children or youth who spend their younger years in an institution, such as a group home, experience difficulties emotionally attaching to caregivers as the caregivers are often not consistent, the children’s level of trust is diminished and they learned that they may not be able to count on others. Archival data from group home agencies shows a nearly 40% of employee turnover; in addition, peers change often, thus increasing the sense of being in an unstable environment or at least one that is constantly changing, which makes it more difficult to open-up and trust caregivers. As previously mentioned, this occurs less often in foster home placements, but if the child experiences enough home placement moves, the end result is similar and the challenges are likely to be the same.

The demographic survey also requested information regarding the participant’s biological parents and foster parents/caregivers educational achievement. The significance of the educational achievement of biological parents or foster parents/caregivers is relevant to the extent that it may indicate the importance placed on education by the caregiving adult. Davis-Kean (2005) reported that the significance of
parental education has been shown in the literature to be highly influential in the educational outcomes of children, but she notes “the mechanisms for understanding this influence, however, have not been well studied” (p. 294). Therefore, whether this level of importance translates into higher expectations, higher involvement in the youth’s educational activities, higher levels of communication with teachers, higher participation in school meetings, or simply providing a role model for the youth, the education level of parents and/or caregivers seems to play a significant role in the academic achievement and school engagement of the student.

Table 3
Participant's Parents/Caregivers Educational Achievement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Biological Parents</th>
<th>Foster Parents / Caregivers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Graduated High School</td>
<td>Attended College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is significant to notice that four out of the six participants reported that their biological parents neither graduated high school, nor attended college. Sara’s biological
parents graduated high school but did not attend college and Jayden did not have information about her biological parents’ educational achievement.

It is also significant to note that all six of the participants reported that their foster parents/caregivers all graduated high school as well as attended college. Three of the participants specifically identified their foster parents as strong support persons in their life who were most important to their educational achievement.

Another piece of information requested by the demographic survey was information related to the number of high schools that the participants attended and the degree they obtained in high school:

Table 4
Number of High Schools Attended by Participants & Degree Obtained

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of High Schools Attended</th>
<th>High School Completion Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td>5+</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Diploma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of schools attended by the participants represents the rate of school mobility they endured. These numbers vary among the participants as one attended more than five high schools, two of them attended four to five high schools, one attended two
to three high schools, and two attended just one high school. Even under those varied circumstances, they all obtained a high school diploma as opposed to a Certificate of Completion or passing the General Educational Development (GED) examination.

The support services received by the participants varied from formal support systems which include Child Protective Services (CPS) social workers, Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) workers, and other collateral service providers; to informal support systems such as friends, relatives, coaches, and church leaders; and attending or participating in voluntary formal workshops or classes such as Independent Living Program (ILP) or Foster Youth Services programs through their local school districts or placement counties. The following Table 5 illustrates the participant’s reported involvement with support services/agencies/workers:

Table 5
Support Services Received by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Independent Living Program</th>
<th>Foster Youth Services</th>
<th>CASA Workers</th>
<th>Informal Support Systems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td></td>
<td>Bio and Foster Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Foster Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Foster Families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td></td>
<td>Foster Family</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The participants reported support systems were essential to their success and four out of six participated in Independent Living Programs and Foster Youth Services while only one of them, Sara, did not participate in any of them nor had a CASA worker assisting her with her educational goals (More detailed information on support systems discussed in the Findings section of this chapter).

Lastly, the demographic survey asked the participants to report on their plans to attend a community college, a four-year college, a trade school or none of those choices. The following were their answers:

Table 6
Participants - Post High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Post High School</th>
<th>Currently Enrolled In</th>
<th>Plans to Attend</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edena</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>Four-Year College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eric</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td>Four-Year College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jayden</td>
<td></td>
<td>Community College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. Marine Corps</td>
<td>Four-Year College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td></td>
<td>Four-Year College</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reported by the participants, four out of the six stated they were currently attending a community college, one is enlisted in the military, and one is currently attending a four-year college. Three of the participants plan to attend a four-year
university. This information illustrates the goal-oriented characteristics of the participants as well as their drive to achieve and accomplish their objectives.

The face-to-face interviews were conducted immediately after the informed consent and the demographic survey was completed. The interviews were audio recorded with permission from the participants and were conducted in a private office, either in the researcher’s professional office or in the conference room of the Atkinson Family Services School where the researcher works. One of the participants travelled to the office on his own, while the other five participants were picked up from their homes, transported by the researcher to the private office, and later transported back to either the participant’s homes or, in one occasion, to the participant’s job site. Based on this situation, it was observed by the researcher that lack of transportation is a challenge that transitional age youth in foster care experience. This challenge makes access to services more difficult for a population that already struggles with being able to get connected with community support services due to lack of information.

The interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a transcript was created for each of the interviews. After the transcript was completed, the researcher listened to the audio recording and simultaneously read the transcript to ensure accuracy of transcription. Once this process was completed, the researcher sent the transcript via email to each of the participants to review. Out of the six participants, three of them responded to the email confirming that the data was accurate and indicated that no changes were needed and the other three did not respond to the email.
As the responses arrived from the participants confirming that the data was accurate, the researcher listened to the interview again, this time without reading the transcript, and sought the participants’ tone, emphasis, and language for areas of the interviews that seemed to be more important to the participants. Without writing any notes at the same time, the researcher attempted to identify at the end of the interview what themes stood out the most and what patterns emerged.

Once all interviews were analyzed, the researcher utilized the research questions as a guide to create lists of themes that were often mentioned by the participants and that attracted the attention of the researcher. As the researcher analyzed the data by listening to the audio-recorded interviews once more, themes emerged with iterations that were originally missed by the researcher. This process of data analysis proved to be richest as the researcher was more immersed in the data after multiple iterations through the data.

Once all the themes were extracted from the audio recordings and the transcripts from the interviews, the researcher read the transcripts one more time and color-coded the data found in sections of the transcripts that provided evidence to the themes found. A different color was used to highlight each theme and organize the data for superior analysis. The richness of the statements from the participants and the perspectives of how they managed their challenges, what they focused on, and what they did to succeed, was evident throughout the interviews.

**Challenges Described by the Participants**

During the course of the interviews, many of the participants reported challenges they faced while in foster care. All participants reported the difficulties associated with
school mobility. Four of the six participants attended multiple high school and the other two attended one high school but reported that they were able to recognize how important of a factor that was for their graduation.

Black attended 2-3 high schools, Jayden and Michael attended 4-5 high school, and Edena attended over 5 high schools. For a teen in foster care, these changes may also represent multiple home placement changes. This level of instability was reported to be extremely difficult by all of the participants.

Being a foster kid, you get moved around. You have to learn. So the part in your brain that's taking in information that should be used for education, is now learning, "Okay, that's his name. That's his name. That's her name. This is where they sleep. This is where their house is. This is their phone number;" when you could be like, "Thomas Jefferson was a president..." It takes a lot of information. I think they (students not in foster care) already have that set foundation so it's easier for them to retain knowledge. For a foster child, it's, "I have to retain everything all at once. I get freaked out. This is too hard. I shut down. (Michael, 2014)

One participant reported the challenge of school mobility had to do with losing credits and not being able to find the right home placement that would be willing to keep a student in their current school placement:

Challenging...there was a lot. One of the biggest things would be moving around so much. Because your credits get mixed up and moving around. That instability, that was hard. Every placement you moved, your (social) workers would try to
keep you in the same area, but it was hard to find a group home or foster home that would take probation (placements) and you could still go to public school.

So, moving around constantly. (Edena, 2014)

Another participant reported her school changes as difficult based on the stability of the peers that she encountered during all her moves. Home placement moves directly affected her school changes:

You have to deal with... between one to five other girls under the same roof, all teenagers in high school. Every single one of them has their own drama, their own baggage they’re carrying... My senior year became hell because I moved from a stable environment of a foster home. The group home was okay stable, but still it wasn’t stable enough. (Jayden, 2015)

Sara and Eric were the two participants who attended one high school and they both were aware of how rare their situation was and reported that they do not believe they would have been able to graduate if they had attended multiple high schools. Sara discussed the experiences of her fiancé, who was also in foster care, who, from her perspective, experienced the typical challenges that most foster youth have by moving schools, as she stated, “a million times”. When asked whether she could put herself in his position, she added:

If I would have switched schools and houses like he did, I wouldn’t graduate high school either. There is no way in God’s grace that I would’ve. I would’ve lost all
hope. I would've gave up a long time before he did. I would have thrown in the towel. (Sara, 2015)

Eric reported that while he had a positive experience attending just one high school and one or two foster homes, stated that others have it difficult and advised other foster youth on how to get through it:

*I know a lot of people have different... I'm not saying I'm perfect because I only went to one high school or I had one or two foster homes, but I can see other people having difficulty because they just go to foster home to foster home or group home to group home. If you can just stay in one place and do your schoolwork and graduate you'll find out it will help you a lot and if you can find some people that help and support you, four years or however many years of high school you have left will just fly by. (Eric, 2014)*

Another challenge reported by two of the participants was related to living with abusive or uncaring caregivers. As one can imagine, the reason behind children and youth being placed into the foster care system is often related to parental neglect or child abuse. Parental neglect is the number one reason (67% of removals according to a study by the Stuart Foundation) for child removal and placement into the foster care system and it is characterized by the parent being unable or unwilling to provide the basic needs of a child such as food, water, shelter, clothing, and/or medical attention (Frerer, 2013). Child abuse can be in the form of physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological, or emotional abuse. Another challenge is the statistic that children and/or youth are abused or
neglected in the foster care system. Thus, once again, children are removed from the biological or adoptive homes and sometimes placed in other homes where they are victimized again. This mistrust leads many foster youth to lose faith in their caregivers and simply put by one of the participants, “they (foster parents) don’t care. If they do, somehow, and if they’re getting paid, they just want the money” (Jayden, 2015).

Another participant perceived her educational struggles early in the foster care system as having to do with being placed in a foster home where the foster parent was physically abusive and simply did not seem to care about her education. She added that despite her efforts to do well and get good grades, she could only do so much due to not having support from her foster home.

*In the beginning I struggled because I was just not in a good foster home. I was in a really abusive one. I wouldn’t go to school because she just did not want to take me to school, so I just wouldn’t go. I just stay home and I just hang out at home all day. That made me fall behind a lot but I still was in my AP and honor classes to get my grades on my test. That's what kept my GPA up because when I got there I would teach it all myself like learn exactly what I missed, bring it home, teach it all myself, go take all the tests I missed. Once I was done with the test I would end up with probably like a B plus, B minus, sometimes a C, because I would do 0% of the homework because I couldn't turn in homework late for some lessons. (Sara, 2015)*

Another challenge reported was the lack of information regarding client rights, educational policies, and the resources available to foster youth. Some participants
reported that when information is available, it is often not provided in a method conducive for foster youth to receive such information. All of the participants reported the need to have information and their struggles in being able to find it. They were thankful for the resources they received attending services like Independent Living Program and Foster Youth Services or by the information provided by their individual child welfare workers or court appointed special advocate (CASA) workers. Two of the participants specifically mentioned that resources were a key factor to their success and one stated she “wouldn’t have known anything about that without my workers, or seeing any extra opportunity classes, like the ILP classes…” (Edena, 2014). The other attributed her knowledge of the system to a special project she did in school regarding foster care. She interviewed several people and learned about her rights, responsibilities, and laws pertaining to her education. She was able to “stand up” for herself and advocate for her own educational and emotional needs.

**Strengths Reported by the Participants**

From a positive perspective, all of the participants were able to identify strengths and benefits within the foster care system. The three themes that emerged from their narratives were supportive caregivers with high expectations, the ability to utilize resources available, and having a strong individual support system. The belief that having high expectations of children or youth is significant to their attainment has been widely researched, and study after study shows positive results in students. For the participants in this study, five of them identified their caregivers as pushing them to do the best that they could and while some recognized that they saw them as “pushy” at that
time, they all now see it as being helpful toward their ability to succeed in school. One stated:

_He (foster parent) nagged sometimes, but mostly he was just like, “Go do your homework.” Usually I would have it done because I don’t like doing stuff when I get home...If he kept nagging and nagging and sometimes I was just done with hearing him, but now that I think back it actually helped me because I’m now going to college._ (Eric, 2014)

Another participant noticed that her friends and social workers had high expectations from her which in turn motivated her to do better and work harder. She also added that this led her to reduce her negative self-talk which kept her self-esteem and self-confidence at a low level.

_When people expect high things from you, especially with her, I worked twice as hard to get there because I knew that I could, because she saw that in me, so other people must see something in me that makes me want to keep pushing myself...My worker she didn’t let me slack, she was on me because from day one she told me she’s like, you’re going to graduate. I was so hard headed. Just really having those people there that expect things from you, and being able, for me, to accept that and be okay with that... After being told and all these things you’re not going to be able to do this, you’re not going to, or even telling yourself sometimes, that I’m just not going to, like, once you start convincing that to yourself it’s like the end. You need to start rethinking other things because that’s when you start getting stuck in your own head. And that’s where these support_
systems come in. That’s where the real people come in. Like, some of my friends dropped off after that, and I have their support after they seen me at my very lowest, and they continually pushed me higher, made me want to do better for myself. (Edena, 2014)

All six participants were able to identify individual people in their lives who were champions throughout their educational careers. Teachers or caregivers, all possessed qualities that inspired the participants to do well, to achieve at their highest potential, and who were perceived by the participants to be caring and genuinely interested in their success. Some participants noticed this support in the form of a small “push” to do homework or to do better in classes, a “push” for them to take higher level courses and in the providing of encouragement and motivation. Some provided meals and some participants even mentioned that it gave them a type of vulnerability that they strongly cherish. But mostly, they noticed that throughout the entire process these people were present with their time, their effort, and their willingness to be there for them, side by side, no matter what the outcomes were. This level of unconditional support can be quite powerful to the emotional well-being of a person, and even more so for a foster youth who has struggled with building and maintaining consistent people in their life.

Another strength identified by all six participants was the resources that were available to them once they knew about them. The significance of these resources varied from financial support, resources on educational rights and laws, assistance with projects during school, and tutoring.
Financial support was identified in the form of money provided under Assembly Bill (AB) 12 which extends foster care until the age of 21. Under AB12, through their 20\textsuperscript{th} birthday, foster youth may continue to live in foster care or they can receive financial assistance for their living expenses if they chose to live on their own. One of the participants, Sara, stated that because of the money she receives from AB12, she does not have to work, which allows her the time to go to school and not “worry about having to work three jobs to pay rent” (Sara, 2015). She added that having medical insurance was also a great benefit.

Three of the participants reported that the Independent Living Program (ILP) was instrumental to their success. The resources that they identified varied from help with one participant’s senior project, to getting tutoring and mentoring for college, and information regarding foster youth needs. The common denominator from all three perspectives was that their ILP worker was caring and helpful which led the researcher to believe that there is a strong connection between resources and the individual support systems that they identified. So whether the ILP program itself is an effective program because of its components and services, or whether it is the connection between the foster youth and his or her own ILP worker, foster youth commonly find the ILP program worthwhile to attend and beneficial to accomplish their goals.

Michael saw resourcefulness in a very broad perspective. He believes that foster youth, due to the nature of their constant need to adjust to new environments, possess a unique ability to be resourceful and adapt in situations where other youth, not in foster care, would have serious difficulties adjusting. His perspective had such positive
implications as it provides a view of foster youth as strong and powerful, rather than the oft mentioned victim perspective.

Another advantage in foster care, you are the most resourceful person that there will ever be. Nothing will face you, like nothing. A hurricane can hit your house tomorrow. It might face you. All my stuff is gone. Dang! If no one is hurt in your house, awesome...I'm not saying that foster kids are immune to disasters but they handle it better than normal people because the main thing, the psychological trauma that kids have had, even if it is just moving twice, that's traumatizing to a person in a way that they don't understand yet. But, when something bad happens and they have to move, they're like, Okay, I'm moving, boom! I have to do this in school. I have to make friends. Can I say the resourcefulness of foster kids is amazing! There's nothing that they can't do! (Michael, 2014)

One participant reported a different perspective, stating that although she benefited from the laws and resources available that allowed her to graduate on time, she felt “pushed out” of school and thought that she did not earn her diploma. While the ability to graduate with the minimum State graduation requirements has been noted as a strength of the foster care system, it can also be considered a discrepant case where the participant saw this benefit as a hindrance to her self-esteem and self-worth, and it took away her sense of pride and accomplishment as she felt she did not earn it.

I didn’t earn it (high school diploma). They gave me credits I didn’t even earn. They gave me biology. I’ve never taken biology in my life. PE, I didn’t pass PE,
and they said I passed PE. They sat there and gave me things I didn’t even do. It’s like they just pushed me out of high school. (Jayden, 2015)

As the participants were able to identify both challenges and benefits from their experience in the foster care system, this study focuses on what the participants did to utilize these benefits and overcome the challenges on their way to high school completion. The following are the findings that originated from the data provided by the participants. The findings are organized as they relate to each research question and describe the most salient themes that arose from the data.

**Students Voices of Success**

What are adults’ perceptions regarding their focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

Themes that emerged in relation to research question # 1

1. Survival
2. Love & Belonging
3. Power

**Theme: Survival**

Survival is described by Choice Theory as the one physiological need that all humans are predisposed by genetics to fulfill. Survival for foster youth is one of the most important needs, along with love and belonging, because it starts with the very basics of needing to have enough food, water, shelter, and safety; the very things that are missing when children are victims of neglect and abuse. Whether this neglect or abuse was at the hand of their biological, foster or adoptive parents, children in foster care struggle with
trusting that necessities will be provided and resort to behaviors such as hoarding food, leaving homes without permission to go to family members or friend houses where they feel cared for, or getting into verbal or physical altercations when they feel threatened or unsafe.

When foster youth have experienced traumatic events such as neglect, abuse, domestic violence, loss of a parent or caregiver, and other events that may impact or impair their functioning abilities, the ability to meet other basic needs takes a back seat to the immediate need to survive.

The effects of trauma on children and youth have been widely studied and range from having feelings of inadequacy around people, to feeling guilt and shame about the traumatic event; they may feel self-conscious about their emotions towards the event, become angry and think about revenge. The trauma may even change the youth’s overall perspective of life and the world as they know it, including the way they form and maintain interpersonal relationships.

In the school setting, the effects of trauma can lead to behavioral challenges, learning disabilities, and attendance problems. Students may experience difficulties concentrating and learning as they have recurrent thoughts of the traumatic events, or may still be experiencing the trauma at home. They may not yet be fully recovered from the trauma and may be re-traumatized every time they get removed from the people they know, making it almost impossible to make healthy attachments. If one considers the rates of foster youth having family history of mental health challenges, it is clear that
other priorities, including education, fall towards the end of the list of importance. Once
participant describes these challenges with very powerful and moving words,

*High school is book smart. It doesn’t show you… if you become homeless what
are you supposed to do? If you lost your best friend to suicide, what are you
supposed to do, sit there and learn to get over it? Or your mom sat there, and
yells at you, and tells you to get the hell out of her life. What are you supposed to
do? School doesn’t teach you how to deal with that.* (Jayden, 2015)

For another participant, the focus on survival was represented by the challenges
associated with moving to different schools and homes. He was often unsure where and
how he would fit in new environments or whether he would be able to make new friends
and adjust to new situations. As mentioned previously, school mobility was identified
by all participants as one of the most difficult challenges they faced thus far in their
education. Aside from the academic challenges such as loss of credits, placement in
courses that are not needed, and lack or insufficient services provided to foster youth;
students face other emotional challenges such as the feelings of grief over the loss of their
peers from both the home and the school environment, the difficulty attaching and
trusting new caregivers and peers from both the home and school front, and the sense of
hopelessness that comes with falling behind and failing often to the point of not being
able to get caught up with their peers’ level of achievement.

*Being a foster kid, you get moved around. You have to learn... so the part in your
brain that's taking in information that should be used for education is now
learning, "Okay, that's his name, that's his name, that's her name. This is where*
they sleep. This is where their house is. This is that phone number..." when you could be like, "Thomas Jefferson was a president..." It takes a lot of information. I think they (children/youth not in foster care) already have that set foundation so it's easier for them to retain knowledge. For a foster child, it's, "I have to retain everything all at once. I get freaked out. This is too hard. Shut down. (Michael, 2014)

Another participant shared that group homes are often viewed in a negative way so the prospect of going to live in one can place a heavy burden and stress on a youth. The idea of going to live in a facility with other youth they do not know, run by adults they do not know or trust who tell them what they can or cannot do is terrifying to most people, more so if this is a frequent experience.

After the group home, I did not know what I was going to be. I thought that I was going to be on my own. I didn’t think I'd actually go to college. I didn't think I graduate... I was like, "My life is over." Like it's not going to be the same anymore and because after (what I learned in) that project you see what happens to kids at the group homes, so I was like I'm just going to be like one of them. (Sara, 2015)

One participant, who felt secure about his own survival need being met, focused on the survival needs of his younger siblings, who like him were placed in foster homes; but unlike his current foster care placement, their foster home was not a good one. This particular participant was not concerned with the challenges he faced and seemed to be, like it is often seen with males in our society, unwilling to share his own thoughts and feelings. He was very passionate and firm on his desire to do what was needed to help
and assist his younger siblings with the challenges of the foster care system. The researcher can vividly recall the participant change his affect from flat to animated when talking about the survival needs of his siblings.

_When I get my own home, or my own place to stay, I'm actually planning to take them and put them in my custody, so I take them out of my old place. I know where I used to live is just not that good._ (Black, 2014)

It is noteworthy to point out that only one participant mentioned the challenges of being placed in homes of a different culture. The role of diversity was nearly missed completely since none of the participant seemed to have had a challenge in this area. While the question was not asked for the participants to self-identify their race or ethnic background, the researcher identified three participants to be Caucasian, two to be Latino, and one to be Pacific Islander. One of the Caucasian participants discussed his struggles related to being placed in cross culture homes.

_When I was smaller, about my second home to my seventh home, nothing but Hispanic families, and they spoke no English, so that was very, very hard. When I had a question about homework and I couldn't understand my own mom and dad. I think that right there is a struggle in itself. Unfortunately, those families didn't work. Granted, they were great people, loving people, they opened up their hearts and their homes to me and I respect that. I'm always grateful because without them I probably wouldn't be where I am today, but the language barrier was really hard._ (Michael, 2014)
This statement reflects the challenges with language but also account for the respect of the participant toward people who were caring and provided safety and security during times of struggle. This type of relationship comfort is addressed in the love and belonging theme section of this Chapter 4.

**Theme: Love & Belonging**

All six participants reported that many of the decisions they made were directly linked by their focus on important people in their life. For some it was a meaningful connection with a caregiver, for others it was a strong individual professional rapport such as a social worker or a teacher, and for others it was a group of friends who pushed them to do better than expected.

The importance of healthy relationships and the feeling of being a “part or member of something” are undoubtedly significant to the development of personality, to the way humans interact with each other, and to the success of students in school.

Through the Choice Theory lens, the need for love and belonging has been arguably noted as the most important of our basic needs. While other needs may become urgent as they are not being met at the time, such as survival (hunger, or thirst, or personal safety in the middle of a war zone), or freedom (when one is unable to make choices); Choice Theory posits that love and belonging is the basic need that drives human behavior, as we have an inherit need to relate to and be with other human beings. Dr. William Glasser believes that “humans have additional genetic instructions, as strong as survival, that drive us to be closely involved with each other all our lives” (Glasser, 1998, p. 27).
The participants in this study perceived this need to be a significant motivator to their success as it drove them to choose behaviors, even ones that they did not necessarily want to do, in order to maintain those relationships.

*I didn’t really want to graduate...They (teachers) wanted me to graduate on time. Me being a people pleaser, I said screw it, I’ll do what you guys want. I’m done pushing, trying to have one more year of high school so I’d have it easy. No. They pretty much sat there and made sure I would graduate. I didn’t want to piss them off. I know they would’ve been really upset with me and gone off. They would’ve hated me, not hated but been really, really upset. I didn’t want to upset them. I’ve already upset a lot of people in my life. I don’t even have one of my best friends anymore because I pissed them off so much with a lot of the decisions I made. (Jayden, 2015)*

For Jayden, the need to belong and keep the connections with her teachers was more important that the comfort and ease of having an extra year in school. It is important to note that her high school graduation also meant that her extended stay in the foster care system would be reduced and she would have to move, which she did, sooner out of her current group home placement to another home. The uncertainty of where she would live, how would she support herself, and other thoughts and feelings related to her survival need was overpowered by her need to maintain those essential relationships in her life.

Similarly, other participants responded that what was more significant to them, in order to accomplish what they did, was having the people around who cared about them
and their goals, and who supported and encouraged them to make the right choices needed to make progress. Their supporters provided the participants with the last push needed to focus on their goals, to complete difficult tasks, to participate in activities that at the beginning seemed uncomfortable, but most of all this encouragement provided them with the feeling that they belonged in the home and it directed them to be more engaged in school, which ultimately resulted in graduation.

*Having people there that wanted that (reach her graduation goals) as well, that’s how I’m still doing it. That’s what keeps pushing me. Even having the people around me, they don’t realize that pushed me. And seeing even how much I impact them, that’s also huge…I mean stability emotionally, people around you, having that kind of support knowing you can tell them, that sort of, having someone you can talk to without it being on a paper, a black and white standard, a heart to heart, having something like that. It was hard to find that. And as humans we want that, we want that kind of connection. It’s hard for that. And when you are moving around consistently, that was hard.* (Edena, 2014)

For three of the participants the connection with their last foster care placement was life changing. All three reported that the bond they formed with their caregivers was so significant that they view their caregivers truly as parents. They all were able to create and still maintain the type of relationship that in foster care is often described as permanency. For two of them, even after leaving foster care placement, they both have been able to maintain closeness to their previous caregivers and come and go as if they were natural children. They spend holidays and other celebrations together, and they feel
that they are part of the family. One participant described this connection as going even further into the foster parent’s extended family and the feeling of acceptance by them was very significant to his sense of belonging. He described:

_Around fourth grade I was at one school. I made a lot of friends. Then I had to leave that foster home to go live with the one I'm at now. At fourth grade, I would be like okay, I'm going to just move and move and move, so I was never really, I'm not going to make friends. I'm in foster care. Then from that point, up until about seventh grade and eighth grade I had the mentality that I was in foster care. No one, not that no one will be my friend, but I don't want to make friends because I'll probably just move. That actually ended late eighth grade, early ninth when I actually made some friends...One thing that really helped with my current placement was (his) family. When I first met them they're like, “Oh”. I am just a foster kid to them, but after a while they actually said, "You are family." That actually helped a lot._ (Eric, 2014)

Another participant described the importance of his peers, much like Eric described above, as a key component of his success in school. With the right peers, he felt engaged in school activities which led him to feel a sense of belonging with a group of students who were a positive influence for him. He specifically noted that after one school change in high school, he was having some difficulties engaging with peers because he perceives himself as “quiet”, but then he learned about basketball tryouts at his school and he decided to try-out for the team and he made it. The team created an immediate ability to meet peers with common interests and it helped him develop student
identity. Later in the interview, he mentions that the school move helped him find a new social group that proved to be a positive influence on his academic achievement and with avoiding a path that included illegal activities.

**Theme: Power**

Choice Theory suggests that the need for power is unique to human beings, unlike the other basic needs that are common to almost all other “high-order animals” (Glasser, 1998, p. 37). He explains that other animals may chose behaviors that are aggressive when threatened or for food or water, but he believes that this is for survival purposes, not for power. He adds that power itself is neither good nor bad, some people seek power in order to dominate or rule others; others utilize their power for the greater good. In alignment with internal control thinking, it is the power of our influence onto others that could be used for the greater good rather than our force to get others to do what we want.

Power is characterized in our society by our competitive nature to win or have more than others, to be seen as an ambitious person who wants to be the best they can be, to be recognized by our accomplishments, to be successful in our field, to achieve the desired social status or position, and to have honor and pride of what we do. Choice Theory states that power itself, has no moral compass, it is just a need that needs to be fulfilled, it is us, through our choices, who decide whether we do right or we do wrong.

For foster youth, power is one of the most difficult needs to fulfill as most of them feel that they do not have any power to make most decisions in their lives. From the basic choices of where to live, where to go to school, or which friends to have; to the more complex choices related to their individual values or beliefs, most foster youth feel
powerless. Using the Choice Theory lens and the characteristics mentioned, the participants focused on this need by making choices that led to accomplishments which led them to gain self-confidence, pride, and self-worth. These accomplishments gave the participants a sense of inner control as they made choices that helped them gain effective control of their lives and also provided the feeling of satisfaction by making positive decisions that efficiently met their educational goals. One participant shared that he concentrated in goal achievement but was not quite sure what that goal actually was, but he does clearly use the characteristics described earlier:

"I don't really know. I don't think I ever knew, and I still don't know, but I knew I wanted to be better than everybody that I was around. I wanted to be that person that in ten years they go, "Wow, you do what? Amazing! A-freaking amazing!" I didn't want to be that kid, that statistic that falls into the system; that was not going to be me. That was my parents, and dear God, it was not going to be me. I was going to be extraordinary. I was going to do awesome things, travel the world, stuff like that. (Michael, 2014)"

Another participant mentioned that the feeling of being good at one subject helped him build confidence in his own abilities, confidence in learning other subjects, and confidence in school overall. The feeling and thinking of being successful in one area, translated into other areas of school, but most importantly, in his overall view of himself and his abilities to accomplish more.

"Once I started getting down my science and stuff, it was like, "You know, maybe since I'm so interested in science, maybe I'll be interested in history." I was okay
in history; I wasn't that great, but history was pretty good. When I got into economics, when I knew it was about life, economics is a huge part of it, I actually did pretty well in that class. I was thinking about my future. Learning about economics, I was actually thinking about minoring in economics myself...It definitely helped me, knowing that math is part of it, and I was like, Oh, I can do this. (Black, 2014)

The researcher observed one participant, Jayden, as she described her experience completing an art project, and as he listened to her tone of voice, the researcher noted that she seemed filled with a sense of pride as she described her abilities to color-blend and how impressed her teacher was. She stated that she “got nominated for most improved within six months. I didn’t win though, but it was still a cool accomplishment that I got nominated” (Jayden, 2015).

Behaviors Promoting Success

What are adults’ perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

Themes that emerged in relation to research question # 2

1. Removing the “foster care label” from themselves

2. Participants’ perceptions of teachers

3. Assumed a teaching role

4. Getting involved in extra-curricular activities

5. Choosing a positive peer group

6. Avoided aggressive/violent/dishonest behaviors
Theme: Removing the “foster care label” from themselves

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2, Review of Related Literature, Choice Theory suggests that all behavior has four inseparable components: acting, thinking, feeling, and the physiology associated with such behavior. The first two components, acting and thinking, are what people can directly control and the other two, feeling and physiology, are indirectly influenced by what we think and do. As such, it was significant in this study that all six participants were able to identify beliefs, thoughts, expectations, stigmas, or simply stated labels that described who foster youth are or are expected to be. These generalizations or prejudices are often utilized by our society, some even without ill-intent, and can be harmful to the foster youth. As the participants identified these expectations, they all chose to do something, changed their story and were able to remove the “foster care label” from themselves. The perceptions of themselves weighted so heavily on them that it could have created a self-fulfilling prophecy repeated over and over with the same result at the end, inability to succeed. But that was not the case for these six participants who went beyond what was expected.

You get a lot of bad rep for being a foster kid, for everything. Oh, he probably did something illegal. Oh, were you on probation? No! Did you ever do anything illegal? No! Did you ever do community service? No. My parents died. Dude, give me a break! Also, though, don't, if any foster kids ever read this or back in later years, don't use that as a crutch because it's only going to get you so far and you really need to learn how to rely on yourself, and you will be amazed about what you can achieve, but you'll be amazed at what you can accomplish. It's
dumbfounding, so don’t sell yourself short. Don’t say, “Well, I was here so I can’t do that.” Even if you fail, try it again. Now you know what not to do; if there’s a two percent chance that you’ll pass, that’s two percent better than if you didn’t try.

Why ever give up? (Michael, 2014)

The thinking associated with this “label” can be so damaging to the essence of a person that it could dominate the perceptions they have of themselves which then could lead to limitations of even attempting to do something. The Spanish word “ganas” represents the desire of a person to achieve their goals despite the struggles associated with this goal, to do whatever it takes but to do it with “guts” and determination. Perhaps the closest English definition is “grit” which is characterized by the determination and resilience to accomplish goals. Often times foster youth have been described as resilient, which this researcher entirely agrees; but these participants, had so much “ganas” that they personally wanted to change society’s perception of them, and wrote a different narrative to be known as. Sara described her experience of intentionally removing the “foster care label” and explains what it meant to her:

My biggest thing was to remove the label of foster care. What that meant is how much that label actually holds you back. That label puts so much pressure on you. I know it for myself. It wasn’t until I learned a lot more about foster care and finally realizing within myself that foster care wasn’t one of my labels and I was able to take that off. It was like an elephant getting off my chest when I did. With foster care, it holds you down and it holds you back. Foster kids (who are) graduating aren’t represented. It’s the other that’s represented; the ones who
dropped out; the ones who are getting pregnant and having kids; the ones who are doing drugs and ending up in the same exact boat that their parents are. I honestly think that’s because of that label of foster kids. It’s the label because of the bad name that holds us back and makes us realize that we’re not who we really are. It makes us realize that we…it makes us think in our head that we can’t reach our full potential. It makes us think in our head that we’re not good enough. We’re just a foster kid, no one wants us, our parents don’t want us, foster parents don’t want us, group homes don’t want us, we’re moving from here to here to here and no one wants us, no one loves us. That foster care label just holds you back so much so you can’t see those goals. Those goals are right outside that label and it’s not until you break that label that you can see those goals. (Sara, 2015)

The positive force of this change of thinking was noticeable on all of the participants. They no longer saw themselves as victims; they saw themselves as courageous youth who can accomplish anything they want, who will thrive in any situation, who feel empowered to face the world and whatever it throws at them. While it was noted that some use the “victim role” perception to their advantage and manipulate others to feel guilt or feel pity for them; most of the participants described this approach as ineffective and while it is common, they all made attempts to not use it.

*I think that we get so hooked on the victim card and so looked on what others have labeled foster youth, and what we need to realize is that those are past experiences, those are the things we had to go through…you have to realize*
there’s nothing else holding you back, there’s no farther than you’ve already been
down before. So having the support, resources, and finding those constantly
building you up, you are no longer the victim, you are no longer what everyone
else has labeled you, you are no longer what the statistics say, and that was like
the biggest thing for me. I am not a victim, I am not the statistics, I am not going
to be anything you can find me to be, if anything, I am going to break all those.
I’m not going to do anything you guys have already labeled me. You guys have
not met me, you know none of these statistics. The minute I say foster youth I’ve
already gotten something, the head-turners, but they know nothing about me,
nothing about my educational status, nothing... I think that’s something we need
to empower within ourselves, and have support and resources that help us with
that. (Edena, 2014)

Theme: Participants’ perceptions of teachers

Another key factor associated with the thinking component was the way the
participants viewed their teachers. The way we perceive others is highly related to the
type of interaction and the type of relationship that can be formed. One can see how
many people could receive very bad information or advice and trust that information
purely based on where it comes from. Similarly, regardless of how good and relevant the
information is, few of us would hear it, much less consider it, if it comes from someone
we dislike or think very little of. In the case of foster youth, as often is the case
considering issues of neglect or abuse, information they receive is highly filtered by the
level of trust that they have with the other person. For the participants in this study, at
least one teacher was able to develop a meaningful relationship with the student and become a champion for their education. This connection with the teacher shaped the way the participants perceived them and they were able to accept their teachings and/or advice much more easily than from other adults, even when at times, this information or advice was seen as pushy or unwanted.

Eric found his Algebra teacher to be very helpful even when he struggled with material; and even in a class that he reportedly hated, English, he found it bearable since his teacher was “funny and cared for every student” (Eric, 2014). Black found one of his teachers more relatable, perhaps because he was “younger than most other teachers and actually a little bit more fun” (Black, 2014). Edena perceived one her teachers as very passionate about what she was teaching and when the teacher noticed that she was also passionate about the subject, it formed an instant “teacher-student connection” (Edena, 2014).

The other three participants developed a profound connection with their teachers and their perception of them was the foundation of that relationship.

She (teacher) was a good Christian woman. She would sit there, and if she noticed something was wrong, within two seconds, and she could see it as soon as you walked in, she would yank you right out of the classroom and you forgot what was going on. She worries about her students. She’s very caring. She’s very intelligent. If I was able to go back...I would go by and say thank you again, but she doesn’t work at that school anymore. I can’t get a hold of her. I miss her.

(Jayden, 2015)
Sara attributed her high school graduation and attending college to one teacher who made a difference. She described the teacher as caring but at the same time with firm limits and boundaries against negative or inappropriate behaviors. She added that it was clear to her that this teacher cared for her, supported her, and even believed in her ability to accomplish her educational goals. She added:

*If every teacher treated me like (teacher’s last name) did my high school experience would have been beyond amazing. It would have been really, really blessed, but just one teacher made a difference. Just one teacher helped me get into college. Just one teacher gave me the confidence within myself to actually do what I needed to do to get to college, to get my stuff together because you had to have a certain GPA to be in the academy.* (Sara, 2015)

Michael described his experience with teachers as something that has changed over the years and with him having more maturity. He discusses issues of respect, respect regarding his own behavior and also respect that he has now for the teaching profession and he stated that he wished that he could have done differently and even seems to show admiration for what teacher do. He also was able to make the connection between students who are respectful and the way that teachers treat them. While it is relatively easy to understand that with more maturity, a person can perceive people and circumstance differently, Michael’s perception of teachers was quite different which makes him the unique participant who did struggle with some of his teachers but was able to accomplish his educational goals. His unique point of view was expressed eloquently in the following statement:
(I respected) some of them, looking back on it, not as much as I should have, but now? The utmost respect...It's amazing what they do and the stress level that they have and I wish a lot of kids would just sit down, sit back, and think about, "Wow, these people get paid nothing to give me everything" It's honestly I think the little things, like things I would get yelled at in school for doing. Coming into class on my phone, disrespectful! Just doing my own thing, not knowing that there's a set system of rules...It's like reaching your hand into another man's refrigerator. You just don't do that, you ask! Being loud, being obnoxious, just little things you don't think about. Day to day, you see your friends doing something, you do it, but it's the little things of respect and when you do those, you're always in class thinking, "Why is he so nice to that student?" That student is nice, soft spoken, quiet, usually says, "No ma'am, Yes, sir." Very respectful so they give that respect back.

(Michael, 2014)

Theme: Assumed a teaching role

The concept of students teaching other students has been utilized by many school and for a variety of reasons, such as the learning process that occurs for the student who is teaching during the preparation phase and the delivery of the teaching; it also serves as an opportunity to develop organizational and oratory skills; and from the perspective of the students receiving the information, the information may be presented in a manner that is more engaging or understandable since it is delivered in the “language” that they can speak from someone who they can relate with. What is not as widely discussed is the feeling of empathy that some students gain from being in the teaching role, the sense of
understanding that their job is challenging and that it requires lots of preparation and
dedication to do this on a daily basis. It also provides them with the sense of pride and
satisfaction that someone has learned something from them and their teachings.

For the participants of this study, this was one common choice they made. Five of
them were able to identify the benefits of teaching someone something, whether it was
how to play a music instruments, a foreign language, or being a teacher’s assistant; they
all gained so much by being a teacher.

I was in French class…I had an open period for sixth so my French teacher had a
sixth period where the class wasn’t doing that well, so she had anyone from our
class that had sixth period off, which all seniors, a lot of seniors had sixth off so
we agreed to help. We go over there and pretty much a TA, teacher’s
assistant...There was this one kid. He was really struggling in French. I just sat
down, pointed at a word, said it and made him say it. When he didn’t say it right, I
slowly pronounced it and he ultimately got it...His grade went from a D to like a
C+...It felt good, I was like, Yeah, I can teach. (Eric, 2014)

For Black, the teaching experience was about playing the guitar. As his senior
project he decided to teach guitar lessons; but more than the teaching aspect itself, he was
able to place himself in a somewhat uncomfortable position and do something he is not
used to. He took some risk and it paid off, and through that risk, his confidence and self-
esteeem grew in way that may not have happened without putting himself in the teaching
role.
I taught many people how to play the guitar, and that was actually one of my senior projects when I came here, was to teach other people, reach out to other people, if they want to learn how to play guitar. I had at least three or four people that wanted to...Actually, that was a very memorable moment, because I'm not really used to reaching out to people like that. I help people that I actually know, but not strangers. In my senior project, I had to help out stranger people...I just put out...Actually, what's so neat is I put it on craigslist, and I put it, "Free guitar lessons for young teenage or older." Actually some people showed up, so that made it pretty cool...and they did (learned) actually, most of them did...It made me feel pretty good, that I've taught someone that they always wanted to learn how to play guitar...and they're very happy about it. It makes me feel really good about myself...I feel like teaching other things is...Something I always wanted to learn, always taught me, and it always made me feel really good about myself. (Black, 2014)

Two of the participants experienced teaching in a mentorship way. Sara reported that she did lectures for the Communications class in high school but found that the mentorship she does with a non-profit organization called Glass Slipper was more meaningful. She found that what she was doing with the young girls in this program was far more inspirational and she recognized that this type of service was something that she wished was done with her.

*But the best thing I think is the mentorship that I do with the Glass Slipper. I got to go and teach girls about our image boot camp with inspiration, motivation,*
action, growth, and empowering our young woman. And so it's actually teaching
them about their inner beauty, and inner love, and loving themselves and really
learning what they're worth and what God made them to do and that there were
so much more than they think they are. And God has a plan for them and
everything is made -- they're made perfect just the way they are. They're God's
angels. That is one thing that I...that's the best teacher relationship, like me
teaching someone like that is the best...(it was important) because I wish someone
was there to teach me, for a long time I didn't have anyone. (Sara, 2015)

Similarly, Edena found herself as a mentor for her younger siblings, and like Sara,
her teachings were more related to life-skills rather than academics. She stated that she is
“teaching her acceptance and being open minded” (Edena, 2014). She added that this has
also been a learning experience for her as she is discovering about herself and the way
she does things and being vulnerable and open about her own life has made the
relationship with her sister more intimate and meaningful.

Michael’s experience teaching was minimal during high school but he did express
how his current role in the military involves teaching others. This experience has
elevated his admiration for his teachers in high school and increased the respect he has
for them. The only participant who did not assume a teaching role was Jayden. She
stated during the interview that she is the type of person that prefers to keep to herself
and, by nature, does “not talk really to other people” (Jayden, 2015).
Theme: Getting involved in extra-curricular activities

All six participants found activities, outside of regular school hours, that they were involved in.

For Michael and Black, joining sport teams was their way to be more involved with positive peers who were not in the foster care system and therefore brought them a level of “normalcy”. Michael stated it helped “separate yourself from the foster care system and you can be a real kid for a minute” (Michael, 2014). Black, much like Michael, saw basketball and guitar playing as activities that helped him with learning socialization skills. The only difference is that for Black, it also helped by learning how to be on his own without being bored and getting into trouble.

Edena participated in theater after school and she stated that she found in her peers a positive and enthusiastic friend who also had strong educational goals. Aside from keeping her from getting into trouble, the theater experience brought to her a love for music, specifically singing, that she was not fully aware of.

There was the musical, Hairspray, I got a lead role and it was really cool...that was my first time singing in front of a large crowd, and with all of the positive kids around, how ready everyone was to support me was pretty cool, and oh, also, because I did that, I also had the courage to go up and perform my spoken word pieces. I write poetry and I never want to go on stage and read my poems or anything, but after I went onstage and sang in front of everyone, I was definitely all for going up onstage and reading poetry. So after that I did an open mic. They had auditions for Hairspray...the lead role I got was “Motor Mouth
Mabel”...after I sang and I was like, I just, I don’t know, it gave like, it built my confidence and I just felt good that whole week, you know? (Edena, 2014)

For both Eric and Sara, social service volunteering was the way they spent time helping others. As reported earlier in this chapter, Sara volunteered her time at a local non-profit called Glass Slipper. She provides mentoring for young girls and finds this time to be invaluable not only for the giving aspect but also because she learned much more from it herself.

Then I met the Glass Slipper. Then it brought about what I've always wanted, which is Sara's voice. Sara's voice is a mentorship and empowerment program for all youth in foster care. To teach them, they're worth it and that's what I wanted for a really, really long time. When I saw Glass Slipper, it was like, "That's exactly what I wanted to do." I started working with the younger girls and the princess parties. Working with them was really, really a big therapy for me. It helped me realize, "I'm worth a lot too." I'm telling these girls they're worth all this. In my head, I'm like, I need to realize that too. Hold on. I do this, I do that, I work, I go to school, I'm worth it. I need to relax. I'm doing good! (Sara, 2015)

Eric saw his experience volunteering for the homeless every Sunday as a way to do something for the community but also recognized the personal rewards from doing it. He stated, “I felt proud of myself because I was actually helping the community and it felt good at the end of the day that I helped someone” (Eric, 2014). This type of experiences gave both Eric and Sara, beyond an activity to do, a sense that they are a part of something bigger and they were able to contribute to it.
**Theme: Choosing a positive peer group**

There is a saying in the Spanish language that says, “Dime con quién andas, y te diré quién eres.” It loosely translates to “Tell me who you are with, and I will tell you who you are.” The closest saying in English seems to be “Guilty by association”, except that in English it only carries a negative undertone. The Spanish version can be used in a positive or negative way. It emphasizes the importance of one’s social group and the power of peer pressure or influence. While the researcher did not specifically ask anything about friends during the interview, two of the participants mentioned that choosing a positive peer group was crucial for them to be able to turn their school life around and focus on their education.

One participants reported that he used to do illegal things and associated with friends who were not a positive influence at the time but then he joined the basketball team and things changed for the better.

*I used to smoke pot a lot, and I used to drink and go out and parties. I actually thought that’s one of the ways you make friends, because I made all my friends through that. Then later on I realized that when I started playing basketball, or I started doing other stuff, I started making more friends by doing that. You didn't have to go out and smoke pot, and drink and all that just to make friends, in a way. I know that’s what actually made me quit, in a way, because I haven’t touched any of that stuff actually in four years, since I left. (Black, 2014)*

The other participant noted that by associating herself with the theater group in her school, she was able to avoid usual school problems and it helped her keep focus in
school work and helped her be motivated to go to school. She added that she made the choice to be “around more positive peers than being around any of the other negative influences in school” (Edena, 2014).

**Theme: Avoided aggressive/violent/dishonest behaviors**

Foster youth are often stereotyped as being troubled youth, or juvenile delinquents, or simply a lost cause. These descriptors could not be further from the truth regarding most youth that this researcher has worked with for the past 18 years, and most certainly do not apply to the six participants in this study. All of them were able to rise from the circumstances they started, into the stepping stone that is college. They were able to learn from their caregivers and teachers enough skills to keep the hope alive of a quality life and have the tools to do something about that goal. One of those small, reachable goals was obtaining a high school diploma, and they did.

Sara perceives herself as a “goody two shoes”. She stated that she was “never” involved in any type of discipline problems in school and she recognized that she was able to receive some special consideration from her teachers and principals because of it. She further recognized that her boyfriend, who was also in foster care, was known as the “troublemaker” and he was treated as such; but she recalled a time when she was able to get consideration for him because of her; she explained that while he was not eligible to go to prom because of his grades and behavior, he was allowed to go because he was her date for prom.

Eric also recognized that his behaviors had a significant influence on the way others perceived him and believes that because of him choosing to avoid negative
behaviors, he was able to stay in one foster home for ten years which allowed him to go
to only one middle school and one high school along with his same peer group.

_In my case, I'm not very, how you say, I don't want to say violent, but whenever_
(foster parent) asked me to do something I would, I'm a big procrastinator. He_
doesn't like it, but I never really got mad with him. I never really destroyed_
anything. I've always been a really calm person and I personally don't have any_
experience about jumping through foster homes because I was just calm. I'm very_
opposite from my brothers and sisters. They're all energetic and fun. I was just_
calm, collected. I actually wanted to go to school. (Eric, 2014)

**Relationships among Themes**

Through the lens of Choice Theory and the research questions proposed by this
researcher, the themes were organized by the perception of: (a) the participant’s focus on
basic needs, and (b) the participant’s behaviors chosen to meet their goal of graduating
high school while being placed in the foster care system.

Starting with the choices of behavior, Choice Theory suggests that all behavior
has four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and physiology. The first two, acting and
thinking, are the ones that one can directly choose to control and thus will be the ones
that represent the choices that the participants made in hopes of achieving their goal of
high school completion. Through this lens, one relationship that became apparent was
the themes that emerge related to the participants’ thoughts and the other to the
participants’ actions.
All of the participants perceived themselves as thinking differently than most other foster youth both in the way they saw themselves and in the way they saw their teachers. This different way of thinking was perhaps the most significant part of the study that was not expected by the researcher. While the actions of a person are the most noticeable component of Total Behavior, most cognitive-behavioral theorists would recognize that the thoughts are the first component that can be changed and that would lead the actions of a person. The other themes described in the findings section of this chapter are related to direct actions that the participants decided to do. Each participant made a conscious choice to teach another student how to play the guitar or to speak French; to participate in the basketball team or to join the theater company; to volunteer at a homeless shelter or at a self-esteem building princess party; to socialize with positive peer groups; and to avoid illegal, aggressive, or ineffective behaviors. The following Figure 3 illustrates the connection between the participants’ choices and the Total Behavior concept of Choice Theory.

*Figure 3. Relationship between Participants’ Choices and Total Behavior Components*
Another relationship between the themes that was apparent is related to the themes from each research question. The choices made by the participants are aimed at satisfying one or more of their basic needs. As such, the following Figure 4 shows how each of the themes found for research question number one is directly aimed at meeting one or more of the themes from research question number two.

![Figure 4. Relationship between Participants' Choices and Basic Needs](image)

In order to assure the quality of the evidence, the researcher utilized research methods to ensure the accuracy of the data such as member checks and triangulation of data. Member checking, also called “respondent validation” (Merriam, 2009, p.217) was a strategy utilized by the researcher seeking to strengthen the accuracy, reliability and validity of instrumentation and design. This measure is an important tool to reduce the risk of misinterpreting what the participants say or do during the interview process. After interviews were transcribed, the researcher sent the participants a copy of the transcribed interviews via email for clarification of content and meaning. Seven days were given to the participants to send back feedback to the researcher regarding the accuracy of the
transcripts. This way, the participants had an opportunity to affirm the information received as accurate and complete, or to inform the researcher that the information does not reflect his or her experience, and that he or she wanted to have something changed, deleted, or added. Any changes that the participant wished to change, delete, or add were honored. Only three participants responded to the researcher and none of them requested any changes to the transcription.

The researcher utilized Yin’s (1994) “Three Principles of Data Collection” as a guide to establish the construct validity and reliability of this multi-case study. The first principle is to use multiple sources of evidence. The researcher utilized a variety of data collection sources in hopes to obtain a broader range of data. First by utilizing a demographic survey, the participant was able to provide general, non-threatening information for the study. The survey was completed by the participant on their own and without interruptions. The participant had full control on answering the questions or providing the requested information, or choosing to not do so. Then the face-to-face interviews provided more rich data as the researcher asked semi-structured questions that solicited deeper understanding of the participants’ experiences. Lastly, the researcher noted observations of the participants’ tone of voice and body language to further assess the participants’ experiences and thus provide an even richer representation of the data. Through this type of triangulation, the researcher attempted to address possible challenges of construct validity since “multiple sources provide multiple measures of the same phenomenon” (Yin, 1994, p. 92).
The second principle is to create a case study database. The data for this study was protected and organized in a single database only accessible to the researcher. The documents collected from the participants, informed consent and demographic survey, were kept separately. The informed consent is the only document that contains a signature with the participants’ real name and thus was kept separate from the data utilized for the study. The demographic survey, the transcripts of the face-to-face interviews, and the researcher’s observational notes were password protected and kept in a dedicated flash drive that was placed in a locked container. Data and pertinent documents will be destroyed following the guidelines approved by the authorizing Institutional Review Board. The third principle is to maintain a chain of evidence. The researcher followed strict guidelines to ensure that the data, and the process by which it was collected and analyzed was transparent in the report and can be traced back for evidence.
Chapter 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

“... we need not to be victims of our past or our present unless we chose to be.” - Dr. William Glasser

Overview of the Study

According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Kid Count Report (2014), there were 397,091 foster youth in placement as of September 30, 2012; 55,262 living in the State of California, and 2,454 living in Sacramento County. Based on the review of literature, fewer than 45% of these foster youth complete high school compared to 79% of the general population. The research reports high disproportion in the numbers of foster youth who are incarcerated compared to the general population; unemployment or under employment rates are high among foster youth; and foster youth are overrepresented in homeless programs and more often utilize public assistance systems of care.

The researcher believes some of the post-foster placement rates reported in the previous paragraph can be reduced if foster youth were able to graduate on time and at the rates that the general population does. High school graduation provides a greater number of opportunities for foster youth to transition into adulthood efficiently and independently.

During the review of related literature, the researcher found an extensive number of studies that focus on the plight of foster youth in their path to success in the educational and foster care systems. While there is an abundant number of quantitative
studies that focus on the challenges foster youth face and their rates of failure, very few studies provide a qualitative approach that includes the voice of the youth, and even fewer studies provide the focus on the positive success stories that give readers, potentially other foster youth and foster youth professionals, what successful foster youth do to complete their high school education.

The researcher aimed the study at seeking answers to two research questions: what are adults' perceptions regarding their focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while in foster care and what are adults' perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care.

The researcher utilized Choice Theory as the theoretical framework and the lens to be used for assessing and understanding the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of the participants in this study. Choice Theory is a relationship-based theory that believes that all humans are born with five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun; and that all human behavior is purposefully intended to satisfy one or more of these five basic needs. Total Behavior is another Choice Theory concept that suggests that all behavior has four components: acting, thinking, feeling, and the physiology associated with such behavior (Glasser, 1998, p. 72). All these components are happening virtually at the same time. For example, as one reads a suspense novel, the action that is seen by others may be flipping of the pages, but most could agree that the reader is probably thinking about the plot and/or the protagonists. There may be some feelings associated with the novel, anger or worry for the characters or perhaps anxiety if the
author has successfully transported the reader into the scene of the crime. There are also physiological changes that can be experienced by the suspense or anxiety such as heart rate increase or decrease, breathing changes, and sweaty palms. Choice Theory suggests that a person can only directly control the acting and thinking component but can indirectly affect the feeling and physiology components (Glasser, 1998, p. 336). It is through this Choice Theory lens that the researcher collected and analyzed the data, and reported the findings for this study.

For the first research question, related to the foster youth’s focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while placed in the foster care system, the researcher found that all six participants chose behaviors that focused on one of the following Choice Theory Basic Needs: survival, love and belonging, and power (Glasser, 1998, p. 28). Survival needs are often difficult to satisfy due to the nature of the foster care system. Foster children and youth are placed into the system due to neglect and/or some form of physical, sexual or emotional child abuse. Children who have suffered from neglect or abuse focus on the survival need as they are preoccupied with threats of personal safety and the security of not knowing when the next meal would come, where would they sleep, or even when would they take care of basic self-care activities such as showering and toileting. The uncertainties of not knowing where they will live, whether their roommate or caregiver is a safe person or whether they would be able to stay in one home or school for an extended period of time are difficult for foster youth to bear.
The love and belonging need is one of the most important according to Choice Theory. Choice Theory believes that all human beings have a need to be highly connected with others and this ability to connect is essential to human happiness. Choice Theory adds that humans often have difficulties connecting to the people they want to get along with the most, and the basis of these difficulties is the main reason for all psychological problems. For the participants of this study and for foster youth in general, finding, developing, and maintaining a strong, positive peer group can be challenging when experiencing high levels of mobility for home and school placements. In regards to challenges with peers, and the added pressure of living under the rules of adults whom they do not know and do not trust, based on their experiences, can be overwhelming for any child, youth or adult, and more so for our foster youth.

The power need in Choice Theory is characterized by the search for achievement, pride, accomplishment, recognition, competition, and in some cases, domination of others. Power itself is neither good nor bad, but Choice Theory suggests that all humans have this need and it must be satisfied through our choices. It is within a person’s choice to use power for good or evil. The power need is one the most difficult to satisfy for the foster youth population as it is the one thing that most identify having very little of and some youth feel like they do not have any. The participants of the study perceived their choices to be focused on the sense of pride and self-confidence they gained as they started to feel increasingly more successful in accomplishing their goal of high school completion. In fact, all six participants not only completed high school but obtained a high school diploma, five of them are currently attending a community college, one is in
the military service, and out of the six, four of them plan to attend a four-year university. These achievements, and the feelings associated with being successful, motivated the participants in wanting to achieve more.

The second research question was related to the adults' perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care. The themes appearing throughout the participants’ narratives were related to the first two components of Choice Theory’s Total Behavior concept, acting and thinking. The most salient themes were related to thinking and the perceptions that the participants had of themselves and their teachers. Once they were able to remove the negative expectations and the “weight” of what the “foster care label” often carries, participants made significant improvement in their capacity to set reachable goals and made the progress needed to attain those goals. In addition, once the barrier to developing close relationships with adults was lowered and trust increased, participants started to perceive teachers as caring, helpful, attentive, and even noticed that some went over and beyond the duty as a teacher and developed a mentor relationship.

Once perceptions were changed, expectations also changed. The participants stopped seeing themselves as victims and started to take responsibility for their own behaviors without making excuses or blaming people or circumstances for their decisions. They started to see their goals as attainable, participated in extra-curricular activities that promoted school engagement, chose more positive peer groups, and chose to avoid illegal, aggressive, or dishonest behaviors. All of these effective and need-
satisfying choices developed a sense of internal motivation that continued to lead them in the path of educational success.

**Interpretation of Findings**

This section provides the researcher’s interpretation of the findings related to the two research questions of this study. The section will synthesize the data collected and will include conclusions that address the two research questions.

1. What are adults' perceptions regarding their focus on basic needs that positively impacted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

The participants in this study identified choices of behaviors that led to satisfying three of the five Basic Needs according to Choice Theory framework: survival, love and belonging, and power. In embarking upon this study, the researcher predicted that the need for survival would be shown to be the most significant theme for the research question. The survival need was evident through the narratives based on the data collected and analyzed, and while it was significant for all participants, the findings show that the more salient themes for the study were equally the need for love and belonging and power. The reason behind the researcher’s thinking, in regards to the survival theme being the most impactful, is related to the researcher’s professional experience in the field of foster care. The most common reasons for placement into the foster care system are neglect and physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Considering the long-lasting and damaging effects of trauma in children and adolescents, the researcher presumed that issues related to this theme were the most important to the foster youth. Perhaps this is the case for other foster youth, but the participants in this study focused their attention on
the more positive aspects of their current life and decided, consciously or unconsciously, not to be victims of their past and to concentrate on their future goals.

While statements of worry and concern regarding the survival need were prevalent in the participants’ narratives, the emphasis in their voice intonation and their affect was observed by the researcher to be of less significance than the other two needs. The researcher does not intend to discount the significant challenges that foster youth face in regards to survival, but rather attempts to point out how other psychological needs can, under certain circumstances, be more substantial than physiological needs. One participant noted that during her first years in the foster care system, she was frightened by her assumptions of what the foster care system was.

*I figured I want to learn more about what foster care is, what it means, what's going to happen to me when I turn 18 if my mom doesn't get me back like what's going to happen.* (Sara, 2015)

Often it is this type of uncertainty that leads foster children and youth to “put up walls” and develop strong defense mechanisms that protect them from the possibility of getting hurt again.

Love and belonging was more significant than the survival need and illustrated by the multiple statements and stories involving caring and important people in the participants’ lives. For some it was relationships with caregivers at their group homes or their foster parents, for some it was relationships with teachers, for others it was relationships with their social workers or CASA workers, and for some others it was relationships with peers and family. Regardless of the person, they all recognized the
importance of having someone who supported them in their goals, who would “push”
them to complete their tasks, and who would simply be there to talk and help them
process. One participant described her experience with her foster mom as “life changing”
and she candidly remembers her time with her foster mom as just “awesome”.

"We spent several nights just sitting in the car. We drive somewhere and go get
something, like something silly, random that we'd need like at the Dollar
Tree...and we like go and drive somewhere, and we'd sit in the car out in front of
the house, and just sit there and talk forever about everything and with God's love
and at the end of every conversation we'd pray. That was like the best thing
because it was just like everything is okay. I can be so emotional and be so, so
upset about I want my mom, or not doing good at school, or I'm stressing about
school, I have a big test coming up, and she would just surround me with God's
love and help me and just support me, and that was one thing that was really,
really awesome." (Sara, 2015)

This type of support shown by Sara’s foster parent is exemplary to her ability to connect,
on many emotional levels, with her foster daughter. She provided her with the
opportunity to have something that she was missing, not literally but figuratively, a
loving and caring mother.

The power need was also dominant in the participant narratives. The participants
satisfied their power need through their accomplishments and achievements. These
achievements led them to build confidence and increased their self-worth which led to
increased self-esteem and confidence and they reported a sense of pride and “felt good”
about themselves. For a population who often believes that they have very little or no power, the participants in this study saw themselves as leaders within their peer group, as examples to other foster youth, and they viewed themselves as being successful.

2. What are adults' perceptions regarding choices of behavior that promoted their success in high school completion while in foster care?

The salient themes of this study were related to participants reframing their thinking on how they perceived themselves, how they perceived teachers and other adults, as well as the participants’ actions such as becoming a teacher or mentor, enrolling in extra-curricular activities, volunteering for local non-profit agencies, and consciously avoiding illegal, aggressive, and violent behaviors.

For some of the participants, the concept of the “foster care label” seemed to be weighing heavily on their confidence and self-esteem. Black reported, “I just feel like I’m being judged right off the first thing” (2014). He added that he was bullied for most of the time during his elementary and middle school years and he attributed some of the bullying to being a child in foster care. Michael reported his inadequacy of being a foster youth every time he went to a new environment and his struggles of being able to participate in activities other kids got to do. He stated:

*I would say that coming into a new town, the wrong kind of clothes on, looking like a fool, and not being able to establish good relationships with friends...a liability risk. No six year old knows what a liability risk is except me because I made two and two and connected the dots. It’s just weird. It’s a struggle to actually make that connection to people your own age. (Michael, 2014)
Jayden reported feelings of shame and guilt associated with being a foster child and stated:

*I did everything possible to stay on everybody’s good side. Like I said, a people pleaser. I don’t like conflicts or dramas. I think it’s because when I was little, nothing but anger was around everybody, and I felt like I was the one who was pissing everybody off. I just tried to keep everybody happy. At the same time, if it’s something that’s really screwed up, I’m going to open my mouth and piss someone off.* (Jayden, 2015)

Despite these early struggles, all participants were able to shed the “foster care label” and its effects from themselves. Through exemplar demonstrations of resilience, the participants resisted the idea of being the one to blame or being the victims of their circumstances and made more effective choices.

The most common choice among the participants was to assume the role of a teacher or a mentor. Participants felt proud for assisting someone to learn how to play the guitar, how to speak French, mentoring a sibling with life skills, or mentoring young girls during empowering parties. This sense of accomplishment and pride satisfied the participants’ need for power but also provided them with a sense of belonging by establishing meaningful connections with their students and mentees.

*I had to walk through with him and visually teach him, "This is how you do it. This is how you do it," and he thought I would be mad at him, but in all theory, I was mad at myself because I took the easy road out. I said, "Just do it," not knowing that I had to actually teach this individual how to do this. It was different*
for me to actually teach someone, so I think it was a good experience that I actually taught him, and now we have a really good relationship. He respects me, and I know if I tell him to do something, he’s going to do it with the utmost respect. Yeah, so I think teaching him something actually came out good. (Michael, 2014)

Another common choice made by the participants was to participate in extracurricular activities. Regardless of the type of activity, the participants were able to enjoy times away from their foster or group home and have a sense of normalcy that sometimes may be difficult to find within the foster care system. Participants believed the peers in these activities were more positive influences than the ones they usually interacted with at their foster or group homes.

I’ve done musical theater and I’ve done that a couple of times. It was something that kept me focused, kept me motivated to go to school. It was…I was around more positive peers than being around any of the other negative influences in school. (Edena, 2014)

What these themes, and other themes discussed in Chapter 4, have in relationship with each other is their aim to satisfy one or more of the Basic Needs according to Choice Theory. According to the Ten Axioms of Choice Theory, “All total behavior is chosen, but we have direct control over only the acting and thinking components. We can however, control our feelings and physiology indirectly through how we choose to act and think” (Glasser, 1998, p. 336). The participants in this study were able to recognize the challenges in their thinking and intentionally chose to reframe it in regards to their
view of self and view of adults in their life. Once the thinking perspective changed, their choices were directed to positive, effective, and connecting habits that led them to feelings of pride, accomplishment, and confidence in themselves.

**Program Objectives**

The California State University, Sacramento, Doctorate in Educational Leadership program has three key curricular themes: Transformational Leadership, Critical Policy Analysis and Action, and Informed Decision Making. Based on these curricular themes, the researcher will report on the study’s significance, outcomes, and implications.

*Transformational Leadership*

Throughout the information discussed in the Background section of Chapter 1, the researcher reported on the dire need for change in the way the current system of education and the foster care system work. Perhaps, most can see or have an opinion of how each one of these two systems can better serve their intended population individually; but when assessing how these two systems work together for the benefit of the youth, the implications are significantly deficient. The rates of suspension and expulsion are higher, and graduation rates among foster youth are far below not only those of the general population but also those of other at-risk, disadvantaged populations.

In the review of related literature chapter of this study, the researcher discovered studies that support the urgent need for interventions in order to assist foster youth in high school completion. Much of the literature reviews shortfalls of foster youth and the inefficiency of current programs in assisting foster youth with high school completion. An insufficient amount of data has been collected regarding successful programs that
demonstrate strong transformational leadership working with this highly vulnerable population. A transformational leader must address the current challenges and strengths of the two systems in the way they work individually and also create a bridge between the two systems to develop a shared vision where foster youth complete high school, move on to college or trade school, and are able to become self-sufficient and productive members of society. Currently the shortfalls of the system create a foster youth population that is highly dependent on social services and is at risk of incarceration, unemployment, and homelessness. A transformational leader would integrate a variety of organized theories and processes in order to seek change in the system.

There have been a few attempts to make changes and implement new laws to help with the current outcomes, but not enough information about them is disseminated and many foster youth are still unaware of their rights and thus are not benefiting from these laws. There are some challenges with the laws and a few trailer bills have attempted to improve and seek more positive results, but still the rates of high school completion for foster youth are far below the rates for the general and other disadvantaged populations.

Leaders who currently work in child welfare systems, foster family agencies, group home agencies, public or private schools, independent living programs, and foster youth services, must aggressively learn educational rights for foster youth and fiercely advocate for their clients. While large-scale reform may be difficult to accomplish, every single agency or worker has the ability to make a difference in the life of the child or youth they work with. Striving for social reform and justice is the ultimate goal but one
cannot forget the person sitting in front of you; transformational leaders are able to recognize that opportunity and be the agents of change.

*Critical Policy Analysis and Action*

As discussed in previous chapters, there have been a few attempts to address the challenges that foster youth face when seeking high school completion. The two main ones discussed in this study are Assembly Bill (AB) 490 and AB167. AB490 attempts to first reduce the school mobility rates for foster youth by mandating that students stay in their school of origin for the remainder of the year regardless of foster placement change. For the foster care system, whether in a group home or foster home placement, this educational law represents some hardship regarding the logistics of having possibly six residents going to six different schools in a single home. In addition, the number of foster homes and group homes has declined over the last few years reducing the number of openings where children or youth who are removed from their natural or adoptive homes can be placed. Both of these concerns present an ethical dilemma regarding equity and social justice issues for authorized representatives and placement social workers in attempting to accommodate the needs of both the foster youth and the foster parents/caregivers. Other aspects of AB490 are related to foster youth being able to receive partial credits for classes they attend when they are removed in the middle of the school year, receiving transfer records in a speedy manner so they can be placed in appropriate classes, and immediate enrollment into new schools after moving to a new placement.
But information and enforcement of this new law is not widely disseminated and many foster youth report they were not aware of their rights, including the participants of the study. Foster youth advocacy groups must critically analyze this law, assess for unintended consequences, and provide avenues for foster youth and service professionals to be more informed.

AB167 came into effect in 2010 and its effects have not been studied. While it is presumed that more foster youth are graduating due to the reduced credit requirements, the effects of a diploma that holds less opportunities could potentially be more harmful to those aspiring to attend a four-year university. Foster youth who obtain a high school diploma through AB167 have the option of attending a community college and complete the requirements needed to transfer if seeking a bachelor’s degree from a four-year university; but at the time when they are working on emancipation and learning how to fully and independently transition into adulthood, general education courses at a community college may not be motivating enough for the youth to enthusiastically continue their education.

**Informed Decision Making**

A leader in the field of education as well as in the foster care system must be knowledgeable of the intimate alignment between education and mental health. To understand the needs of this particular population, a leader must keep informed of the benefits and challenges that the foster care population faces, not only from the educational perspective but also from other areas of the foster youth’s life. Understanding the background and bio-psycho-social history of the student may take
time and funds at all levels of service, but the benefit of doing a thorough assessment of the needs and services the foster youth requires will be felt not only by the educational and foster care systems, but also other sectors such as the human assistance department, the criminal justice system, and other systems that are or could be involved. By creating collaborations within all of these systems, a transformational leader would be able to utilize raw and archival data from all stakeholders involved to develop policies and procedures that could effectively improve the educational outcomes of foster youth and reduce, or possibly eliminate, their dependence on other systems of care.

**Recommendations for Actions**

From a transformational leadership perspective, leaders in foster and group home care agencies must assess their current policies and procedures to ensure that agencies are providing legal, ethical, and equitable practices within each organization. These practices must include collaboration with multiple partners in the community to form a unified force that will strive to assist foster youth improve their educational outcomes. The researcher, based on the challenges and strengths perceived by the participants of this study, recommends the following:

1. Group home and foster family agencies need to provide therapeutic groups or workshops for foster youth focusing on identity development, self-worth, and confidence building skills. Due to the frequency and intensity of difficult behaviors demonstrated by foster children and youth, services focusing on behavioral challenges are needed and appropriate for this population, but an insufficient amount of services address the long-term effects of the “foster care
label” in the youth’s identity and personality development. Focus is needed to help foster youth believe that they can achieve their goals and how much foster youth are similar to, rather than different from, the non-foster population.

2. Group home and foster family agencies need to develop relationship-based programs that foster the growth of goal-oriented choices of behavior. Once a therapeutic rapport exists between the foster youth and the caregiver, strength-based techniques need to be used to assist the foster youth to self-evaluate their choices and decide whether they are getting what they wanted out of them. This self-evaluation would assist them in deciding whether they need to continue to do what they are doing or help them think whether they need to do something else. The key is to develop a strong relationship where the student can see the value of the information received and feel empowered to make his or her own decisions.

3. Training for foster parents and caregivers is recommended in Choice Theory concepts. Choice Theory training would assists with Recommendation # 2 and would offer providers the tools needed to help clients select more effective choices. In addition, teaching the clients Choice Theory would be empowering for them to learn about their basic needs and how to effectively choose behaviors that meet those needs.

4. Teachers and administrators need to receive adequate training in working with the foster youth population. The training should focus on deeper understanding of the long-term effects of neglect, child abuse, domestic violence, behavioral or mental health, and legal and ethical considerations in both the foster care and educational
systems. In addition, a sensitivity training component needs to be added for teachers and administrators to learn skills that will reach and inspire foster youth in the educational setting.

5. For even wider reach, credentialing programs could include components of sensitivity training, communication skills, and rapport building that would be helpful in working with special needs populations. While adequate courses are available for special education services, such as learning disabilities or developmental delays, not enough courses are geared to educate future teachers regarding emotional challenges and difficult behaviors presented by populations such as the foster children and youth. An emphasis on relationship building and building support systems are the key factors for future teachers to learn and effectively work with this population.

6. Teachers and other professionals who work with similar populations may be able to utilize the training and education programs described in Recommendations #4 and #5. While this study is intended to work with the foster youth population, similar skills and interventions could be used in working with students who may have experienced traumatic situations such as loss of family members, rape, severe accidents, domestic violence, divorce, bullying, or any other event that may lead to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). These events may lead students to be disconnected from their family, peers, and school and teachers or counselors could become their champion in getting them re-connected and return to the path of success.
7. Foster care advocacy groups need to reach out to foster and group home agencies and schools to facilitate informational workshops regarding current laws and trends that are developed by current and former foster youth in order to provide the necessary data to assist leaders in making better informed decisions.

8. Placement counties need to emphasize during budget development meetings the need to fund more prevention programs over treatment programs. Advocacy programs such as the court appointed special advocate need to be encouraged and volunteers for these programs need to be sought and recruited in order to develop a consistent, and ideally permanent, “champion” for the foster youth.

9. State agencies that regulate licenses for group homes and foster family agencies need to work collaboratively with all their partners, especially group home and foster home providers, and the authorized representatives and placement agencies. The needs of the foster youth must always be the foremost priority and the three agencies must work together with that shared vision. As reported and observed by the researcher, these three agencies often have different regulations and expectations of each other. Group home and foster agencies receive placements from different county’s child welfare agencies and must follow the county’s expected treatment plans; but group home and foster agencies are licensed by the State agency which often has different expectations, thus leaving the homes to decide which government agency’s rules to follow. Real and effective collaborations need to exist between these three parties or the one party who suffers has been and will be the foster youth.
10. Additional funding, either at a local, State, or Federal level, needs to be provided for the specific purposes of enrolling foster youth in extra-curricular activities. Activities such as sports, theater, dance, cheerleading, band, and camp are costly but the benefit that they provide for the youth is significant to their social and educational development; in the long-run, the cost is minimal when compared to the current costs of foster youth ending up incarcerated, homeless, unemployed, and utilizing other dependency public systems.

This study is significant to current foster care service providers such as foster family agencies, child welfare agencies, probation departments, adoption assistance programs, foster-adopt agencies, school administration and counseling staff, collateral service providers such as therapists, foster youth services workers, independent living program staff and volunteers, court appointed special advocates, foster youth advocacy groups, and most importantly to current and former foster youth. In addition, other sectors of government need to be brought into the discussion to create collaborations and support systems for foster youth.

Dissemination of findings will be done using a variety of methods. Since communication is contextual, the researcher plans to inform different audiences of the results from this qualitative study. Through the professional connections that the researcher has within the foster care system, the findings will be provided to members of foster family agency provider groups, group home provider groups, foster youth services, independent living programs, and other collateral formal or informal support systems. The findings will be summarized and provided in an easy-to-read format for para-
professionals, caregivers, and foster youth. The full version will be made available for those who wish to read the entire report. In addition, the researcher intends to turn this dissertation study into a journal article for publication. Journals to be considered will be focused on foster youth, education, and the theoretical framework utilized in this study, Choice Theory. Lastly, the researcher also intends to send proposals to relevant conferences in order to present the findings of this study.

**Recommendations for Future Study**

While the literature shows some research on the effect of mentoring with at-risk youth through programs like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, very little research has been done specifically on their effect foster youth. Furthermore, even less research has been done when the mentors or teachers are foster youth mentoring others. Based on the results of this study, five out of six participants found themselves in teaching roles, mentoring and volunteer opportunities. They all reported a sense of pride and accomplishment resulting from their experiences and they all noted an increased level of confidence and self-esteem. This sense of accomplishment may have provided them with motivation to “give back” and possibly developed a sense of duty by doing something for others. This researcher proposes that further studies are needed to evaluate the positive effects of a peer mentoring program within the foster care system not only seeking the outcomes on the mentees but also from the teacher or mentor perspective.

A comprehensive and longitudinal policy review on the effects of Assembly Bill 490 and Assembly Bill 167 is needed. While ten years have passed since AB490 was implemented, many foster youth still do not have enough information about their rights
and authorized representatives and placement workers still ignore this law due to other challenges such as foster placement availability. Rates of school mobility for foster youth are still significantly higher than other populations, transferring credits is still a problem, immediate enrollment is not immediate, and often the educational liaisons are the ones approving school changes for reasons other than the educational needs of the foster youth.

Because funding is often a key consideration in any policy change, a study could be conducted to analyze the cost of a policy that would mandate foster family and group home agencies to keep students in their school of origin, without exemptions due to placement availability, and provide they receive additional travel time and transportation funding if the student needs to attend a school outside the foster or group home’s school of residence. Mileage reimbursements and cost for additional staffing in group homes could offset the frequent need of homes that request the school transfer, which is often approved by authorized representatives and placement workers. A cost-analysis study may provide the necessary data to inform decision-makers whether additional funds for the foster care system are needed and could provide better educational outcomes, thus better results in the quality of life of foster youth and reduced cost for other related systems of care.

AB167 provides foster youth with an opportunity to obtain a high school diploma with reduced requirements. Most school districts have the discretion to design the criteria for a high school diploma; it often includes approximately 220 credits. Under AB167, foster youth who qualify are exempted from school district requirements and obtain a
high school diploma by completing the 130 credits needed under State standards. This diploma does not have the same course requirements as a traditional high school diploma, and may affect the foster youth’s ability to attend a four-year university directly after high school. A study that includes not only high school graduation but also includes rates of incarceration, utilization of public assistance, and other signs of independent living is much needed to see if AB167 is truly changing the outcomes of foster youth. While the law is well intended and is aimed at improving high school graduation rates for foster youth, and perhaps it has, there have not been significant improvements in the quality of life of foster youth in regards to their post foster care outcomes.

**Limitations**

There are a number of limitations to this study. One of the assumptions of the study is that the answers obtained during the interviews are truthful and are not skewed by the perceived need to tell someone what they want to hear. Some foster youth may tend to give responses they perceive may sound “better” or would give the researcher the impression they are “tougher”, “stronger”, “smarter”, and not leave them feeling or looking “weak” or “vulnerable”.

While it is not intended to generalize to other foster youth, this study was aimed at providing insight on what successful students perceived, made sense of, and reacted to what they were able to do in order to accomplish their educational goals. The researcher utilized a qualitative research design to tell the story through the foster youth’s voice and inform practitioners and policy-makers in the future.
The study utilized one theoretical framework, Choice Theory. While Choice Theory is broad enough to encompass varied areas of personal, emotional, educational, and managerial components, it is limited to the lens by which it suggests or assumes things to be. The researcher, a licensed marriage and family therapist, and Choice Theory certified, has a professional bias as he views behavior and its purposes through the same theoretical lens.

One more thing to be noted, the researcher later analyzed whether an initial statement he made during the face-to-face interviews may have significantly influenced the tone of the interviews. The researcher recalls that during the discussion of the study portion of the interview, as he explained the population and sample criteria, the researcher highlighted the reason why the participants were invited was because they had accomplished the daunting task of graduating high school while being placed in foster care. The researcher did not intend to instill a sense of pride or to point out their accomplishment, but it is possible that due to this statement, some participants may have felt glad or proud to be selected, thus shaping their responses with the hopes of not disappointing the researcher or the person who invited them.

**Reflections on Research Process**

The inspiration that the participants provided for the researcher was significant to the extent that it re-energized the professional purpose and extinguished some of the hopelessness that often surrounds the field of social services. In an industry where the common thread is the loss and suffering of others, the stories from the participants of this study light up the dark sentiments that often fill the hearts of many direct service
providers such as the researcher. It was an honor to be the conduit of their voice, hearing their narratives was a reminder of what can be accomplished if one believes, and while foster care statistics can be stories of horror, theirs were stories of hope, of resilience, of dedication, of hard-work, of success.

Findings are shaping the way of thinking and decision-making process for the researcher’s professional environment. During placement referral reviews in the researcher’s own agency, new cases are discussed in order to find a home that is the best fit for the potential foster youth and school placement is a factor discussed. Whether the potential client is placed in a mainstream school, a special education school, a private school, or any other type of school; the agency social workers often take into account the feasibility of taking a new client to their school of origin. If the home already has one or more clients going to different schools, the agency social worker tends to request that in order to place the potential new client; the client needs to change school to the home’s school of residency. Because of the limited number of foster homes available, at least within the Sacramento County area, and the limited beds available in the Sacramento County Receiving Home (where foster children are often taken after being removed from their natural homes), the potential client’s authorized representative often agrees to the school change. Archival data from previous years shows that many new foster placements were placed under these contingency terms. The researcher has already raised this discussion among the agency’s placement team and will endeavor to continue to challenge placement workers within and outside his own agency.
Conclusion

During the conceptual phase of this dissertation study, the researcher sought to find answers to questions related to the success of foster youth in attaining their educational goals. Through the 18 years of experience working with the foster care population, the researcher was filled with hypotheses and beliefs from his perspective of what works and what does not work. The choice to utilize qualitative research for this dissertation provided an avenue to make meaning to what the participants perceived and it provided a channel for their voices to be heard. The review of related literature clearly shows that few studies have looked at the foster youth challenges from a strength-based perspective and focus their research on the success, rather than the challenges that foster youth face.

The findings of this study appear to indicate that this type of study is vital to understand what foster youth students think and do on their path to high school completion. From their examples of effective choice making and resiliency, foster care professionals, advocates, and foster youth may be able to take away ideas that could lead to policies and practices that improve the educational outcomes of a larger population of foster youth.

The use of an internal psychology theoretical framework such as Choice Theory was deliberate and intentional as it is needed for foster youth to understand that it is their choices that will affect their future. Dr. William Glasser taught that “what happened in the past that was painful has a great deal to do with what we are today, but revisiting this painful past can contribute little or nothing to what we need to do now” (1998, p. 334).
Foster youth can be taught that they do not have to be victims of their past and they can be shown skills and techniques to shed the burden of the “foster care label” and lead productive and happy lives.

Botany, the scientific study of plants, teaches the devastating effects of uprooting a plant and constantly transplanting it to another pot or area. Regardless how good the soil may be, the shocking effects of moving the plant so often can be damaging, even fatal, to the plant. But even in the worst situations, some plants can show resiliency, manage to survive, and thrive to their fullest potential. Without the intent to reduce foster youth to plants, this concept resonates with the foster home and school mobility rates that foster youth experience. The damaging results on the foster youth are real, and sadly, may lead to self-harming or even deadly situations. Foster parents and group home caregivers must provide the necessary care and attention to the foster youth in order for physical and emotional growth to happen and for them to blossom into the best version they can be.
APPENDICES
Appendix A

Informed Consent
Informed Consent

You are invited to participate in a research study which will seek to understand the experiences of foster youth while completing their high school education. My name is Cesar A. Castaneda, and I am a doctorate student in the College of Education at California State University, Sacramento. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were able to successfully complete high school while in foster care.

The purpose of this research is to understand the experiences of successful students who completed high school while in foster care placement. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete a demographic survey and then meet with the researcher for one face-to-face interview (45 to 60 minutes in length) which will be audio recorded. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences during high school and you have the right to refuse to answer any questions. You will receive a copy of the transcript for the purpose of accuracy and clarifying the data collected. Your participation in this study will last from October 2014 until March 2015.

There are some possible risks involved for participants. These risks may involve entering a discussion that may remind you of unpleasant events. There are some benefits to this research, particularly that through the power of your voice, I may be able to identify some similarities of successful practices that lead to high school completion for students in foster care.
If you have any questions about the research at any time, please email me at cesarcastaneda.mft@gmail.com or call me at (916) 826-0507, or Dr. Frank Lilly (916) 278-4120. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project please call the Office of Research Affairs, California State University, Sacramento, (916) 278-5674, or email irb@csus.edu.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Measures to insure your confidentiality are in place to ensure anonymity and any potential risk of harm to you. During the interview, I will ask you to choose a pseudo-name which will be the one used for the rest of the study. Digital voice recordings, hand written observations during interviews, and all digital field records are password protected and will be maintained in a safe, locked location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the study is completed.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You will not receive any compensation of any kind for participating in this study. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you willingly agree to participate, that you may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of
benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and
that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

You will be offered a copy of this signed form to keep.

________________________  ______________
Signature                  Date
Appendix B

Demographic Survey
Demographic Survey

Pseudo-Name: ________________________________ Date: ____________

What type of placement(s) were/are you in? Group Home ___ Foster Home ___ Both ___

What age were you when you first entered placement? _____ Current Age: _____

How many years were you/have you been in placement? Under 2 yrs. _____
2-5 yrs. _____ Over 5 yrs. _____

How many placements have you been in? 1-2 ___
3-5 ___
5-10 ___ Over 10 ___

Did your bio parents graduate high school? Yes ___ No ___

Did they attend college? Yes ___ No ___

Did your caregivers graduate high school? Yes ___ No ___

Did they attend college? Yes ___ No ___

Did you participate in Independent Living Skills program? Yes ___ No ___

Did you participate in Foster Youth Services assistance? Yes ___ No ___

How many high schools have you attended? 1 ___
2-3 ___
4-5 ___ Over 5 ___

Did you receive? A High School Diploma ___
A GED ___
A Certificate of Completion ___
If still in school, are you on track to receive one of the above? Yes ___  No ___
If so, which one? ____________________________

Can you identify a strong support person in your life? Yes ___  No ___
If so, who were they? ____________________________

Do you plan to attend?  Community College ____
Four-Year University ____
Trade School ____
None ____

If not planning to attend school, what is the main reason why? Financial reasons ____
Do not feel capable ____
Not sure what to do ____
Not enough support ____
Appendix C

Interview Questions
Face-to-Face Interview Questions

• Can you tell me a story when you felt good about a project in school?
  o Was the grade that you received in the project important?
  o What was so different from other projects?
• Do you remember a class that you looked forward to go to?
  o Was the course material interesting to you?
  o What was your relationship with the teacher in that class?
  o Do you remember the information from that class?
• Can you tell me about a person you think was the most helpful to your success?
  o In what way were they important?
  o Can you describe him/her?
• Is there a time when you taught someone to do something?
  o What was that experience like?
  o Did you accomplish what you wanted?
  o How important was it for you that he/she/they learned?
• What was most helpful to you during high school?
• What was challenging about high school?
  o What would have helped you be more successful?
  o Were you able to overcome the challenges? If so, how?
• What advantages or disadvantages did/do you think foster youth have in being successful in high school?
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