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CLOSING THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP AMONG FOSTER CARE CHILDREN

By

Ralph Cheriza

A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership

Ross College of Education

Lynn University

2022

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, the legal landscape has changed to support a framework that guarantees educational stability to foster care students as a subgroup facing myriad adverse developmental outcomes and risk factors that impede academic achievement. In 2013, California has discovered an invisible achievement gap among this distinct subgroup with unrecognized and unmet educational needs. Nationwide, the trend has not been different, prompting a need to get insight into the school setting in Florida to meet the needs of foster care students.

The literature review has suggested that foster care students remain invisible to teachers and have unmet, unstudied, and unrecognizable educational needs. They have the highest mobility rate, experienced trauma in their lives, and are ill-prepared for independent life. The system of care – made of several agencies involved in their lives – is described as dysfunctional.

This research has investigated current K-12 school settings in South Florida through semi-structured interviews with seasoned dependency case workers, subject matter experts, and successful foster care alumni to identify effective strategies to mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences, school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students and thereby reduce the achievement gap.

The study has also looked at a historic commitment to comprehensive educational opportunity as a right and a national goal and the need for schools to be accountable to increase student achievement in proposing a distributive and participative model of leadership for a paradigm shift that would lead to organizational synergy for improved performance, ongoing assessment, and professional development consistent with the challenge.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a child growing up in a country with strong superstitious beliefs and limited access to health care, I was doomed. Predictions were made that I would not be able to learn. Nevertheless, my mother - a modest woman with solid faith and a resilient spirit – dismissed the prognosis of the medical community. She sent me to school because of a firm conviction that God "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the dump to seat them with nobles, with the princes of his people" (Ps. 113:7-8).

I want to express my deepest gratitude to the chair of my committee Dr. Nancy Kline for the guidance, inspiration, and support she has provided throughout those months of uncertainties and challenges. In the last four years, I lost loved ones that could have derailed the journey: My aunt Estelle, my father Antoine, my mother Angelia, and my best friend and confidant, Regine. Many times, I could have given up. Dr. Kline's kept encouraging me. Her support and expertise have been critical to completing this study.

I am deeply indebted to the other members of my committee, Dr. Jennifer Lesh and Dr. Joe Melita, who provided critical insights. I appreciate the patience it took to go over drafts after drafts to guide me through that process.

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I want to extend my sincere thanks to all those advocates and practitioners who helped me recruit participants for this study. I am grateful to the participants who tried hard to find the time to share their perspectives.

Special thanks to my children: Rachelle, Anaiah, and Gavyn, who were so encouraging and supportive. I know how much you have sacrificed and how much you have missed. I owe you a debt of gratitude.

I thank all my siblings, nephews, nieces, aunts, and cousins for your confidence and support.

This achievement shows the power of faith. I can hear my mom say, *pale mwa d'sa!* (Haitian creole for this is what I am talking about!). She would have been proud. This achievement is a testament to her faith.

Finally, I would be remiss in not mentioning the members of cohort 15 who have challenged me and supported me all those years. We have learned so much from each other, and I am thankful. I will always treasure the memories, the conversation, and the needed peer motivation when the path seemed so murky and the goal so distant and unreachable. Thank you!

## DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to my three angels who did not live to see this accomplishment but whose inspiration and unrelenting support made it possible.

I was born in a remote town of Haiti to a single mother with modest means. Because of health challenges, I was constantly in the hospital. Doctors told my late mother (Angelia Francois) not to bother sending me to school because I would never learn. She trusted her God in sending me to school. My life is an improbable journey, a story that must be told.

In memoriam, I salute my mother. She was the quiet force God used to lead me to greener pastures. She never gave up on me. Thanks to her, I beat the odds.

As a child, I faced so many challenges. I do not know much about the diagnosis that caused medical doctors to tell my mother not to send me to school. She did not disclose this to me until I earned my master's degree. I know I had learning challenges and speech impediments. My late aunt Estelle Francois Gustinvil helped me overcome that challenge.

As a single father of three children, my decision to pursue a doctoral degree was difficult. I could not have done it without the unrelenting support of my best friend and confidant, Regine Philippe, who passed away just weeks before I defended my dissertation. She was this phenomenal woman who stood by me through thick and thin. She will always be in my heart.

I worked with foster youth enrolled in the Extended Foster Care program years ago. I have learned so much from their own stories. I dedicate this study to them as well. Their stories inspired me throughout this journey.



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## **Chapter I - Introduction**

Since 2017, as a practitioner, I worked with emancipated foster youth to facilitate a successful transition into responsible adulthood. In that role, I witnessed firsthand the plight of those young adults in their academic pursuits. When they turn 18, they are expected "to attain financial and emotional independence" yet "are woefully unprepared for independent adult life" (Krinsky & Liebermann, 2011, p. 292). Berger and Associates (2015) explain that foster care children face myriad adverse developmental outcomes and a host of risk factors that impede academic achievement. Despite the best intention of current legislation in providing incentives for academic achievement, foster care students underperform as "less than half obtain a high school diploma, and as few as 20 percent go on to postsecondary education" (Tyre, 2012, p. 231).

The current study looks at the K-12 foster care student population in South Florida to identify data points for comparison in assessing the needs of that population, considering current legislative mandates, national trend, and alarming findings in comparable states.

### **Background of the Problem**

Presently, there is no comprehensive study on the academic performance of foster care students in Florida. But the national trend gives reason for concern. In its non-regulatory guidance (2016), The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported that about 270,000 foster care students face academic challenges with "unique needs." Interestingly, the guidance refers to a study out of California describing the challenges of students in the foster care system. The California study portrays foster care students as a distinct group facing unique challenges that put them at risk of academic failure. Much can be learned from that study and its findings.

### *The California Experience*

In 2013, California awoke to the reality of an invisible achievement gap among foster care children, seen as a distinct group with unique characteristics, when the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning at WestEd released a study that describes the experience of foster care students in the state with a “distressing achievement gap” which amounts to an “education crisis.” Ironically, at the time of the report, California had an ambitious goal of providing high-quality education to all students. The state was mindful of low academic achievement among racial/ethnic minority students, English learners, students raised in poverty, and students with disabilities but unaware of the achievement gap among foster care students. The failure to notice that crisis was, in fact, due to a lack of information on the performance of foster care students as a subgroup. California was reckoning with the detrimental effect of the absence of a tracking system with disaggregated data on the performance of foster care students.

The California study – the first-ever snapshot of all K-12 students in foster care – presented this subgroup as facing unbelievable challenges ranging from unsafe home situations which warranted removal and separation from their families as well as frequent moves and placements while in care. More to the point is the finding that foster care students were invisible to educators and child welfare professionals and that “the education needs of these students have often gone unrecognized and unmet” (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 1).

In the second report of the study, researchers asserted that “Classroom teachers and other educators are generally unaware of students' foster care status . . . due to challenges related to availability, collection, and sharing of information about these students between the education and child welfare systems. As a result, the education needs of these students have been unstudied and unrecognized” (Weigmann, Putnam-Horstein, Barrat, Magruder, and Needlell, 2014, p. 1).

The study further described foster care students in California as a distinct group facing unique challenges likely to impact school performance. Students in care were deemed distinct because of their unique, ethnic, and racial makeup, among other things. There are inherent challenges as well: Members of the subgroup were more likely to have a disability diagnosis, among which emotional disturbance (22 percent) – is five (5) times higher than the low Social Economic Status (SES) rate. The subgroup also has a high rate of other health impairments, such as hyperactivity disorder and mental retardation/intellectual disability. Thirty-nine percent of foster students in California have a specific learning disability. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade, nearly one in ten students in foster care were overage, which heightened the risk of dropping out of school.

***The National Trend: High Mobility, Unmet Needs, and Dysfunctional Systems***

California uncovered a "vexing problem" that is not unique to the state. It illustrates a national trend. The Education Research and Data Center reported in 2019 that "the gap in academic achievements between youth in foster care exists across all indicators and persists over grade level (time) for the same student cohort" (Chen, Pyle, & Aldrich, 2019, p. 6).

**A Highly Mobile Group.** One of the challenges this group face is the high mobility rate. Official data released in 2016 by the U.S. Department of Education indicates that foster care students have the highest mobility rate, creating gaps in the learning cycle as they adjust to new classroom settings and break their social network.

First, foster care children are highly mobile because of placement instability often associated with or leading to school instability. The California study shows one-third of foster care students change school at least once during the school year – four times the rate of low socio-economic students - and seven percent "attended three or more schools during the school year, a level of mobility experienced by only about one percent of the low SES and general

student populations” (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 14). The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education published a national factsheet on the educational outcomes of children in foster care (2018) indicating up to 75% of foster care students change schools within the first year of entering care. When looking at the 17- and 18-year-old group, 34.2 percent have had five or more school changes. Another study cited by Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, and Tis (2018) showed that “anywhere from 22% to 70% of youth experience a placement disruption each year” (p. 87).

High mobility is a severe challenge to educational stability and care coordination. A longitudinal K-12 analysis of school mobility in Chicago revealed, “the odds of graduating from high school on time are reduced by 12-19% with each school change . . . Highly mobile students experience disparities in curricula and instructional methods . . . may miss the opportunity to learn key concepts leading to gaps of knowledge in their academic foundation” (Clemens, Lalonde & Sheesley, 2016, p. 194). That same study also found that the “more frequently students in foster care change schools, the less likely they are to exit K-12 educational system successfully” (p. 198).

Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, and Tis (2018) found “a statistically significant negative relationship with student academic growth, which was exacerbated when child welfare placement and school instability occurred together” (p. 90).

**Invisible with Unmet Needs in Very Dysfunctional Systems.** Berardi and Morton (2017) described foster care students as an “invisible population” with a bleak future in which only 56.3 percent earned a high school diploma. In 2015, Morton argued that educators were not “adequately trained to meet the unique needs of those students” (p. 476).



The high mobility creates severe challenges for the dependency care system and educational system in ensuring care coordination to serve this population better. As those students move around, the two (2) systems fail to communicate and coordinate actions, as evidenced by the failure to facilitate the transmission of school records to allow for an accurate assessment of needs. As teachers and educators remain oblivious to the foster care status of their students, it makes it difficult to assess their needs or track their progress. Berardi and Morton (2017) argued, "that lack of information creates an unfortunate disadvantage for the student, teacher, and administrator, creating a significant disconnect" (p. 10).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008 - hereafter referred to as the Fostering Connections Act - was enacted to support foster care children beyond their emancipation age. It creates a new legal landscape that serves as a framework for policy initiatives and actions. The Act provides for educational stability, among other things – by requiring states to ensure that foster care children stay in their school of origin to the extent possible or be transferred promptly with federal support for school-related transportation costs. The Act recognizes that collaboration and joint decision-making between child welfare and educational agencies were critical to positive educational outcomes.

The Fostering Connections Act identifies educational attainment as one of the critical factors impacting self-sufficiency and makes provisions for continued services beyond the emancipation age up to 21 years old. The law sought to increase educational stability and outcomes by requiring collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies.

In their non-regulatory guidance issued in 2016, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services articulated not only the importance of collaboration but also emphasized that laws in the books - such as Fostering Connections Act -

“make clear that the educational stability of children in foster care is a joint responsibility of educational and child welfare agencies, and to successfully implement these provisions, these entities will need to collaborate continuously” (p.5).

Regardless of that mandate, Tyre (2012) noticed that “schools do not typically identify youths in care, and social service agencies do not routinely disclose that youths are in care, making it difficult to intervene . . . . Educators may not recognize the unique challenges faced by youths in foster care . . . and caseworkers may have a limited understanding of how to advocate on behalf of their educational needs” (p. 231). Berardi and Morton (2017) submitted that because of the frequent relocations and uncertain residency status, the needs of foster care students “are not recognized or communicated to the appropriate school personnel” (p. 10).

Harrison-Jackson (2009) found that foster care students had at least two (2) placement changes during high school and were more likely to be pulled out of school for court appearances, therapy sessions, and medical appointments. In other words, disruption becomes the norm. Child welfare agencies primarily focus on the essence of their job, which – in praxis – becomes a mere facilitation of placement in a search for a safe environment for the abused kids. In so doing, they hinder their rights to quality education. Harrison-Jackson rightfully submitted, “The child-welfare and educational systems have failed to provide specific remedies to facilitate positive educational achievement among this subgroup of the foster care population” (p. 5).

Furthermore, the California study reveals that foster care students were more likely to attend the lowest performing schools, consistent with the national trend. Cox (2013) argued that foster care children face various educational obstacles and savage inequalities: They attend low-performing schools with inexperienced, ill-equipped teachers. More telling is the sense of inadequacy teachers report. Cox (2013) explained: “school personnel are often not adequately

informed about the needs of these children, do not feel supported in working with them, and do not have a collaborative relationship with local child welfare agencies" (p, 59). Schools have been unable to identify their issues, track their performance and develop effective strategies to overcome their challenges.

Several legislative initiatives have sought to resolve the problem. In 1999, President William Jefferson Clinton signed the Foster Care Independent Act "to provide states with more funding and greater flexibility to establish programs designed to help young people transition from foster care to self-sufficiency" (Guinn, 2000, p. 404). The legislation was responding to alarming statistics about the challenges foster children face. The Act accomplishes several things:

1. Change the name of the independent living program to the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independent Program.
2. Double funding for Independent Living Programs
  - a. Used for transition planning.
  - b. Up to 30% may be used for room and board for youth ages 18 to 21.
3. Extend Medicaid coverage to the age of 21.
4. Increase asset/saving limits from \$1,000 to \$10,000.
5. Direct the Department of Health and Human Services to develop outcome measures to assess state performance:
  - a. Educational attainment
  - b. Employment
  - c. Avoidance of dependency
  - d. Homelessness

- e. Non-marital childbirth
- f. High-risk behaviors
- g. incarceration

Between 2008 and 2012, child welfare agencies served up to 753,000 children annually, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Nevertheless, the system failed to meet its obligations under the Foster Care Independent Act of 1999. A bold legislative initiative was not sufficient to close the achievement gap. The National Conference of State Legislatures recognizes that foster care students "have lower proficiency rates, are more likely to receive poor grades and are less likely to do their homework; have higher rates of absence or tardiness, higher mobility rates of school transfer, higher grade retention rates, higher discipline referral rates or expulsion, higher rates of special education classification; experience a significantly higher dropout rate; and are less likely to enroll in college" (Nowak, 2013, p. 5).

Based on the Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) report, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services noted those common challenges as it relates to the educational pursuit of foster care students nationwide:

- 1) Multiple school changes because of placement changes.
- 2) Inconsistency in providing services to meet children's education-related needs.
- 3) The educational needs of children were not assessed or addressed.
- 4) Difficulty maintaining or coordinating educational services.
- 5) Lack of communication.
- 6) Delays in transferring Individual Education Plans and credits and delays in enrollment.

The lack of data sharing creates complacency about the problem's urgency, which amounts to gross neglect. Clemens, Lalonde, and Sheesley (2016) found that “the educational attainment of students who experience foster care is well below their non-foster care peers . . . students in foster care typically graduate from high school at a rate far below their non-foster care peers” (p. 193).

### ***Adverse Childhood Experiences, a Barrier to Learning***

For long, policymakers and researchers have wrestled with the implications of children's exposure to abuses and trauma in the hope of preventing adverse experiences and identifying mitigating factors to reduce their impacts on life outcomes. Since the landmark longitudinal study of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in 1995-1997 by the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente, much has been made of the negative impact of abuse and neglect on the health and wellbeing of children and the subsequent implications on learning. Because of the population and the scope of that ACEs study, the findings were shocking and troubling.

Shantel Crosby (2015) found that trauma was prevalent in childhood. Her study reveals that children who experience four or more Adverse Childhood Experiences are 32 times more likely to have learning and behavioral problems. That is consistent with the original ACEs study's findings, but what is troublesome and of particular interest to this study is her contention that “Youths in foster care also demonstrate higher levels of trauma and have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with greater frequency . . . . Into adulthood, rates of PTSD are over 20 percent higher for foster care alumni than among the general population” (p. 223).

The challenge of foster care students is not merely a question of high mobility and dysfunctional systems. It stems also from a traumatic journey that begins with adverse childhood

experiences. That experience, which causes separation from relatives, is traumatic and leaves scars that will take many resources to heal.

Palmieri and La Salle (2017) found that the accumulation of social and behavioral difficulties put foster care children at greater risk for academic difficulties. Followed is their description of the vulnerabilities that make it so difficult and challenging for them to focus on academics:

Deficits in social skills . . . poor peer relations, difficulty controlling impulses . . . delays in forming connections, and a lack of coping strategies . . . These students (students in the dependency care system) may also have general feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt, and social withdrawal. Put simply, students may be unaware of the new schools' norms for behavior. As a result, staff can misinterpret their behaviors. . . . When faced with a threatening situation, these students (Foster care students) might withdraw or become unresponsive, which can be misinterpreted as defiance. (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017, p. 119)

In other words, the frequent transitions only exacerbate their traumatic experience as they create more barriers to their educational pursuits that need to be considered. Berardi and Morton (2017) explained the effect of a traumatic background and the divided focus between survival, working through the challenges of state custody, and academics, creating severe deficits for foster children. Morton (2015) argued that "youth in foster care bring emotional and behavioral challenges into a classroom and that the education system may not be adequately prepared to meet those unique needs" (p. 3) as she chronicled the journey of eleven foster youth through the K-12 school system and described issues of anger, abuse, and disempowerment which impede their academic performance.

### *The Florida Dilemma: Strained Dependency Care System*

There is anecdotal evidence that Florida is experiencing the same dilemma related to the low performance of foster care students. More alarming is that the state is seeing a spike in the number of children placed in foster care due to a 1.7 percent increase in the child population and a poverty rate of 2% higher than the national average, according to the Florida Department of Children and Families in its 2017 annual performance report. Menzel (2015) quoted Mark Jones of the Community Partnership for Children serving Volusia and Putnam counties as reporting a spike of thirty-five percent. Since the wave of media reports on child death in 2013, the legislature enacted sweeping new legislation with a change in safety methodology, which “involve looking past a single incident that prompts a visit from a child protective investigator to the likelihood of danger down the road” (Menzel, 2015, para 4). Child welfare professionals credit the spike to a new methodology and population growth but also a high turnover of child protective investigators. The new investigators tend to err on the side of removing a child. Moreover, Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, and Halfon (2014) showed that Florida had a higher prevalence of children who experienced two or more of the nine adverse childhood experiences, although not significantly.

Even without the increase, the state was already unique. Nowak (2013) noted, “Florida's entry rate into foster care per 1,000 children in the general population has been historically higher than the national average. Florida's rates have been steadily increasing, ranging from 3.7 to 3.9 per 1,000 in the last four state fiscal years” (p. 2). Copeland and Main (2020) reported that roughly four children from the child welfare system in every Florida Classroom. The system is described as strained as “heavy workloads, high intensity, large caseloads, and demanding

administrative burdens collide until it becomes too much. Staff turnover averages between 40 and 60 percent.” (Copeland & Main, 2020, para. 5).

However, the worst is yet to come. Ponushis (2014) predicted a surge of children would flood an already strained state system. The caseworkers are not the only ones feeling overburdened. “Foster parents feel beat up by the system . . . . They are told to advocate for the children, but when they do, they are ignored” (para 9).

### ***The Lesson from California***

The lesson from California is simple: monitoring and tracking the performance of the foster care student are critical steps in closing the achievement gap, as illustrated by the subsequent actions in that state.

Shortly after the study, California Governor Jerry Brown and the legislature enacted legislation to include foster care students in a landmark school funding and accountability initiative. The legislation targeted foster care children in ways never seen before. It:

1. Requires school districts to count foster students and track their progress.
2. Provides districts with additional funding to serve four high-needs groups: Low-income students, English learners, foster students, and homeless children.
3. Requires each district to prepare a local control and accountability plan to discuss using the additional funding to serve the four high-needs groups.

As a result, Jill Rowland of the Alliance of Children's Rights noticed "a sea change in terms of people paying attention to the needs of foster youth" (Waters, 2019, para 6). Although advocates complained that the results have been mixed and that no substantial gains have been seen on key metrics (standardized tests, graduation rates, suspension rates, and chronic



absenteeism rates), there have been encouraging signs wherever the funding matched the commitment.

Collaboration and additional staffing were critical. The successful districts recognized the traumatic experiences of foster children and provided an avenue for them to deal with their emotions however intense. They also understood the deficits that impede their academics and provided additional resources for equitable educational opportunities.

In Bonita Unified County, two staff members were assigned to work with foster kids and homeless children. The special education teacher would receive an email about a foster child's enrollment and be charged with welcoming that student into the school to build rapport and seek understanding. That teacher has a classroom designed to provide a safe space for students to come and deal with emotions whenever needed. The teacher would offer tutoring in reading and math to help overcome deficits. Furthermore, when the student is being transferred out of the school, there is advance notice to the special education teacher.

In Oakland Unified County, Case Managers were hired to serve as advocates and counselors for foster students.

Washington State gives us another valuable insight into the problem as the only state reporting accountability data. Not only do foster children lag their peers with a twenty-plus percentage point gap across many years, grade levels, and assessment categories, but they also experience emotional consequences (feelings of rejection, lack of control, and insecurity) of life disruption. They start "each year below grade level and then continued to fall further behind year over year . . . . Students enter the foster care system academically behind" (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, & Tis, 2018, pp. 90-91).

It is imperative to understand the dynamics of the performance of foster care children in the K-12 school system to mitigate risks of academic failures. The California initiative has influenced the enactment of Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 in its requirement that students in foster care be included in a state report card. Jill Rowland may be right in her assessment of the California initiative: "making real gains for foster students is going to require more resources and more oversight of districts. . . . the districts that are focused on the unique needs of foster care are beginning to make real gains. All districts need to make the same commitment to serving students in foster care" (Waters, 2019, para 35).

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of the study stems from what Heise (2017) called the devolution of power over K-12 schooling from the federal government to the states since the enactment of Every Students Succeed Act (ESSA) in 2015. No Child Left Behind ushered in the era of accountability, but ESSA shifts that responsibility onto the states and the burden of academic achievement onto the schools. Moreover, ESSA also mandates states to include information on the performance of foster care students in their report cards. The disaggregated data would help better understand the complexity of foster care students' challenges.

As previously stated, the mobility rate amongst foster care students is the highest compared to other low social and economic status groups. That is the consequence of a dependency care system that prioritizes safety and moves swiftly to remove children from unsafe environments to prevent further abuses. Despite a legislative mandate for stability, the system has been unable to prevent those frequent moves. The argument has been made that unless the combined effect of placement and school instability "are understood, can an effective solution be

further developed, and clear expectations set for measuring progress" (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde & Tis, 2018, p. 87).

The performance of foster care students must be analyzed and understood also within the context of America's historic commitment to equal educational opportunity for all, including minorities and low-income students. From the writings of John Adams to the Common School movement of the mid-nineteenth century, as well as contemporary education reform movements, there has been a consistent effort to carry out an egalitarian ideal by calling for the establishment of "comprehensive educational opportunity as a right. . . . To provide the full range of resources necessary to meet the urgent educational needs of children from backgrounds of poverty" (Rebell, 2012, p. 53).

Gomez-Green (2020) reminded us of Lam & Wong's assertion that our "founders created schools to create competent citizen, independent and critical thinkers" (p. 13).

In *Brown v Board of Education* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court established that education is a right and must be made available to all on equal terms. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 recognized the same need for equal opportunity through comprehensive services by establishing Title I to provide additional services to low-income students.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 established the right to a free and appropriate public education as an educational entitlement consistent with the fourteenth Amendment.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 - building on legal precedence - called for "a fair, equal and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education" and implicitly established that "states do need to provide sufficient, comprehensive resources if all students are to have a meaningful opportunity to succeed" (Rebell, 2012, p. 68). While the Act sought to improve

educational outcomes for all youths, Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) felt “the NCLB reforms may unintentionally disadvantage foster care youths by not requiring a specific focus on their unique needs to receive a quality education” (p. 83).

It is indeed telling that the Act did not list foster care students as an at-risk subgroup despite the documented risk factors. As stated earlier, this group has been invisible to educators and social workers. It reflects the lack of focus on the performance or even the struggle of foster care students. Gustavsson and MacEachron (2012) reported that seventy-one percent of foster care children are of school age. It is then necessary to understand the dynamic of this invisible subgroup so that schools can be equipped to understand their unique challenges and develop effective strategies to help them access quality education.

At its core, this is about social justice and equality. Gerardo Gonzalez suggested that the "civil rights question of our nation today is that of access to a quality education" (Grove & Montgomery, 2003, p. 23). As discussed earlier, foster care students are more likely to attend underperforming schools with inexperienced teachers. The challenge for foster care students is that the inequalities they must overcome began before they even enter the school system. On that premise, failing to provide foster care students with adequate resources that meet their individual needs would be a dereliction of duty. The question then becomes how to secure appropriate resources - given individual needs – for foster care students to have a fighting chance.

To the extent their vulnerability was created by traumatic experiences that deprived them of so much, it is a question of social justice. To the extent their vulnerability impacts their ability to learn and grow, it is a quest for equitable educational opportunities.

In 1837, Horace Mann, the Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, concluded, “Schools should not be held accountable for academics alone but must inculcate

democratic moral and political values so that literacy will not be misused" (Jacobsen & Rothstein, 2015, p. 79). In the era of accountability and the near-exclusive emphasis on academic skills, the purpose of education can easily be overlooked. However, it is clear from the founding fathers' writings that the education system was intended to serve more than just academic goals.

Public school was designed to meet societal needs and the nation's aspirations. Gomez-Green (2020) quoted Lam & Wong as stating that our founding founders believed "education settings should create a competent citizen made up of independent and critical thinkers who can work effectively with others to contribute to society as a whole" (p. 13).

Consequently, to assess the academic achievement of foster care students, the researcher suggests metrics beyond mere academics. That is consistent with the goal of ensuring they are ready for independent life by entering the job market and become contributing citizen. School leaders should incorporate – and it is more so with foster care children – readiness to enter the job market as a metric of success.

It is also critical to understand the school's impact in helping repair the damage done to some of our children, given that research shows that trauma is prevalent in childhood. Crosby (2015) established that "schools have a significant impact on youth wellbeing" as they are influenced "by their unique biological and psychological characteristics, but also by the family system, school, community, and larger social system that surrounds them" (p. 224). That is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory on human development and behavior.

Because learning is a social process, "social-emotional competence and academic achievement are undoubtedly intertwined, and the provision of education in both of these areas maximizes student's potential to succeed in school and throughout their lives" (Palmieri & La Salle, 2017, p. 119).

## **Rationale for the Study**

The data suggest that foster care students enter the school system with serious disadvantages and go through schooling with unmet and dire needs. They are the subject of gross negligence and injustice in that they are in the care of complex systems of care with competing interests and no synergy, making learning even more challenging given their traumatic experiences and inherent deficits.

The current study proposes schools as that safe environment to provide foster care students with a strong sense of belonging. That need is even more significant given that the Center for Disease Control is suggesting that trauma is becoming "a common and pervasive problem, affecting approximately two-thirds of Americans . . . public schools are the ideal medium for comprehensive intervention" (Plumb, Bush, and Kersevich, 2016, p. 38). Schools are responsible for creating a healthy environment that will empower foster care children to learn and subsequently thrive by addressing the needs of the whole child. The study looks at a transformational, collective, and distributed leadership approach to create a healthy school ecosystem that is fair, appropriately resourced, and highly accountable.

## ***Conceptual Framework***

This researcher looks at the Marzano Focused School Leader Evaluation Model as a conceptual model for this study. The model supports school leaders "to continuously improve their practice, concentrating on focused, research-based elements correlated to school improvement and restoring the right balance between instructional and organizational leadership" (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018, p. 1). As a framework, the model breaks down the domain of responsibility into individual elements. It is, therefore, a distributive and participative

form of leadership that is complex enough to provide objectivity yet streamlined enough to support ease of adoption and use.

That framework recognizes the need to generate capacity for improvement. It encourages skillful involvement with adequate resources to build a learning community in which teachers and students learn from each other in a relationship based on trust, awareness of the challenges, and the courage to address uncomfortable truths. It will help change the school culture and climate to recognize leadership at all levels for positive outcomes. The framework provides comprehensive growth and evaluation to address "actions, decisions, and work that school leaders do in their multifaced roles" (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018, p. 7).

Harris and Lambert (2003) are correct in their assessment that school leadership should be "a broad concept . . . embedded in the school community as a whole. Such a broadening of the concept of leadership suggests shared responsibility for a shared purpose" (p. 16). The Marzano Model provides instructional and organizational leadership synergy and supports improved performance and professional growth. It addresses every aspect of the functioning of the school, culture, climate, safety, and budget to lead rather than manage to recognize as Stein did that "America's highest performing schools are the products of good leadership as opposed to effective management" (Carbaugh & Marzano, 2018, p. 5).

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Given the evidence, the researcher believes that school plays a critical role in shaping our children's future. Sherman (2016) reminds us of the ecological perspective while discussing the school social worker's role in its early days. The approach to intervention was guided by the notion that the environment impacted behavior and learning. As Urie Bronfenbrenner (1917) stated: "the understanding of human development demands more than the direct observation of

behavior on the part of one or two persons in the same place; it requires examination of multiperson systems of interaction not limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject” (p. 21).

The current study looks at Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecology of Human Development to address the problem. The ecological theory views human development as a product of various interacting systems. A child's healthy development depends mainly on synchronizing the various systems. The reality is that we expect children to be able to function in society, but that starts in schools. Crosby (2015) states that children need to adjust “their behavior to perform as successful students in the classroom, sons, daughters at home, friends to their peers, and community members in their neighborhood. Traumatized youth encounter challenges in their ecosystem that can impede this development, such as high rates of PTSD, counterproductive school exclusionary discipline policies and procedures, and a host of other issues” (p. 224).

It is, therefore, imperative to look at school as an ecosystem with the charge of providing students with the appropriate environment for academic success. Because students’ achievement is contingent upon their ability to meet societal needs, schools should be equipped to "help children to understand, appreciate, and value persons belonging to social, cultural and ethnic groups different from their own and thus to increase affiliation and decrease alienation" (Goodlad, p. 53). Therefore, – from that ecological perspective – the goal would be to facilitate instructional improvement and bolster capacity building for educational change to ensure inclusion, equity, and social justice.

A study out of the University of Wisconsin found that “the disruption associated with placement, which involves separation from a child’s primary caregiver(s) and, often, siblings and



other family members, may cause emotional and social stress and thereby reduce school achievement” (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, Rias-Salas, 2015, p.110).

Even more critical is the observation of Berardi and Morton (2017) that: "unmitigated stress and trauma are wreaking havoc in our schools. The academic and social impact of traumatic histories has become a social justice imperative" (p.27). Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, and Tis (2018) argued that "only once the combined effects of placement and school instability are understood can effective solutions be further developed, and clear expectations set for measuring progress" (p.87).

This research proposes a trauma-informed framework that considers Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to ensure academic achievement in studying this unique subgroup of low-performing students.

### *Context of the Study*

The current study seeks to identify effective strategies and critical tools to ensure positive educational achievement to foster care students. To do that, this researcher proposes looking at the lived experiences of the foster care alumni. Between three percent (Yarbrough, 2017) and twelve percent (Harrison-Jackson, 2009) graduate from a four-year college. There is much to learn from that group of foster care alumni who have defied expectations to become successful. They have not only graduated high school but also earned a college degree to maintain gainful employment, allowing them to be self-sufficient. We can also learn from teachers, administrators, and leaders in the K-12 school system in South Florida for an assessment of needs. Skilbred, Iverson, and Moldestad (2017) found value in interviewing young adults who have experienced foster care and have completed postsecondary education as they can focus and reflect on their direct experience.

## **Purpose of the Study**

First and foremost, this study seeks to understand effective strategies that could help mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences and school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students and thereby reduce the achievement gap.

The linkage between out-of-home placement and adverse educational outcomes has been problematic at best. There is no substantiated evidence that the mere fact of being under state care leads to academic failure because of the many risk factors affecting those students. The University of Wisconsin's study reveals no statistically discernable relationship. "Whereas all CPS-involved (Child Protective Services) children exhibit poorer achievement than non-CPS involved children (including SNAP participants), OHP (Out of Home Placement) is not particularly salient concerning academic achievement among children investigated by CPS" (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015, p. 115). Harrison-Jackson, in his study, found that high school completion prior to emancipation was a key predictor of educational achievement and recommended tying emancipation to high school completion rather than reaching an arbitrary set age limit. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that his sampling did not represent the foster care population.

This study seeks to answer specific research questions related to the role of the school as a critical link for better outcomes. The purpose is to determine the appropriate school environment for academic achievement. As it relates to foster care children – and to the extent they have several risk factors that could impede academic achievement – what is the appropriate and healthy school ecosystem that would allow for ongoing assessment of unmet and unrecognized needs of foster children to provide adequate resources to ensure equitable educational opportunity for a group left behind? The goal is to understand what makes this group

unique and determine effective strategies to overcome their challenges to mitigate the effect of trauma and frequent transitions on academic performance.

### **Research Questions**

This study will attempt to address the following research questions related to the overarching quest for effective strategies to close the achievement gap:

1. What strategies could help schools identify the needs and barriers of foster care children?
2. What tools are needed to help foster children mitigate educational transitions and adverse childhood experiences to improve academic performance?

### **Assumptions**

This researcher makes assumptions based on his familiarity with the studied population and literature review. Those assumptions guide the study and the way the investigation is conducted.

#### ***General Methodology Assumption***

Foster care students are considered a very protected group. It is difficult to get information about them and from them. The study takes that into account in deciding the methodology of this study. Given that they would be hard to reach, the researcher has decided to target foster care alumni (foster care children who have reached 21 years of age and are no longer considered a ward of the state) to talk about their experiences in the K-12 school system to determine best practices.

The other assumption is that there is a legal framework that provides clear mandates yet a systemic failure to recognize inherent challenges in guaranteeing quality education to foster care students.

### *Theoretical Assumptions*

This researcher believes that school is fundamental in helping traumatized children become resilient and eventually excel, but it takes resources and leadership. The research assumes that:

1. The disconnect between social welfare agencies and school systems is causing prejudice to foster care students' rights to equitable educational opportunity.
2. A transformational leadership model and trauma-informed care teaching practices will create a healthy school environment that ensures academic achievement for all students.

### **Definition of Terms**

- **Emancipated Foster Youth** – A child that has reached the maximum age of 18 in the foster care system and is no longer a ward of the state.
- **Aging Out** – The process of a youth transitioning from the formal control of the foster care system towards independent living. These children are still in the system when they reach the age of majority/have graduated from high school yet have not found permanency.
- **Young Adult** – individual 18-21 years of age.
- **EFC** – Stands for Extended Foster Care. A voluntary program that allows young adults 18-21 to continue receiving foster care services while completing secondary, postsecondary, or vocational while working towards independent living.
- **Educational Attainment** – The highest level of education an individual has completed.
- **Academic Achievement** – Completing educational benchmarks such as high school diploma – successful assessment measures (Elementary, middle, and high school).
- **CPS** – Child Protective Services

- **OHP** – Out-of-home placement
- **School Mobility** – Moving from one school to another that is not dictated by a typical transition point.
- **Social Capital** – Relationships and interactions among students, parents, teachers, school administrators, and the school community support educational success.
- **Foster Care** – Defines by federal legislation as 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the child welfare agency has placement and care responsibility.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The scope of this study is limited to what schools can do to mitigate the adverse impact of the traumatic journey of the foster care student.

We are not assessing policy initiatives that may or may not help remediate the situation.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

The chapter presents foster care children as a distinct subgroup of academically at-risk students, invisible to educators and case workers with unmet, unrecognized, and unstudied educational needs but trapped in strained systems with competing interests and no synergy. The challenges of those students start even before they enter school with their traumatic experience to the frequent moves and placement they are subjected to, which leads to feelings of rejection and anxiety. The accumulations of social and behavioral difficulties put them at even greater academic risk. The challenge is made even worse because they are likely to attend low-performing schools that lack the resources needed to meet their needs. The chapter also make the case for school to play a critical role for a holistic approach to addressing the challenges facing foster care students.

## **Chapter II - LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

In 2013, Florida joined a handful of states (California, Illinois, and Washington) to extend the emancipation age of foster care children from 18 to 21 (22 if there is a disability) in the hope of complementing “efforts to achieve self-sufficiency and transition from adolescence to adulthood” (Chor, Petras, and Perez, 2018, p. 1403). As indicated in the Invisible Gap report of 2013, foster children lag their peers in educational attainment. They experience formidable challenges, including persistent low expectations, lack of specialized services, and frequent educational transitions, which increase their risk of adverse school outcomes.

Clemens and colleagues (2016) explained – 87% are below grade level in math when entering high school. They score below on standardized tests. They have a high rate of grade retention, higher rates of absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout.

Palmieri and La Salle (2017) found that foster children are "twice as likely to be absent from school and to have received an out-of-school suspension and up to three and a half times more likely to receive special education services" (p. 117).

This literature review indicates that they face unmet and unrecognized needs amounting to educational neglect.

### **Evidence of Unmet and Unrecognized Needs**

In 2009, Markell Harrison-Jackson hypothesized that failure to complete high school while in foster care creates a significant risk of academic failure. To influence current legislation, he explored what factors influence academic achievement, defined as earning a postsecondary credential and/or enrolling in postsecondary education. His study found that academic

achievement was related to earning a high school credential while in care and the number of foster care placements.

The study revealed, "A substantial number of children and adolescents entering foster care have multiple physical, learning, and psychological disabilities that place them at a higher risk for academic underachievement (Harrison-Jackson, 2009, pp. 6-7). More troubling was that those "who experienced child maltreatment before or during foster care had lower educational achievement than alumni who were not abused" (pp. 102-103). The study found that students experiencing multiple school transfers had lower levels of educational achievements than those with fewer transfers. That study concluded that the number of foster care placements was a significant negative predictor of educational achievement.

More disturbing was the analysis of the 40 years of implementation of federal mandates that revealed, "Public child welfare and educational systems are not well structured. These two interconnected systems had failed to establish interagency agreements that would mediate positive educational achievement among youth in foster care" (Harrison-Jackson, 2009, p. 104).

Harrison-Jackson spent 23 years in the child welfare system in New York after his father killed his mother when he was only two years old. For his study, he had access to a longitudinal dataset from the Casey National Foster Care Alumni Study, which showed less than 70 percent high school graduation among foster care children and sixteen to twenty percent below others on statewide standardized tests. The dataset also revealed a weaker academic achievement in higher education among those earning their high school credentials after leaving care.

From his perspective, the problem starts before the children even enter care. However, the system (both public child welfare and education) did not have the appropriate structure to help them overcome their challenges. Consequently, their right to equitable educational

opportunities was infringed. It is worth noting that he focused solely on educational achievement as it relates to postsecondary education. He used data from Midwest and Western states, which are not closely representative of the general foster care population. Still, his findings and observations give us valuable information to evaluate the performance of both the child welfare and education systems regarding service delivery and educational outcomes.

In Wisconsin, Berger and associates indicated that involvement and placement in care were not unique experiences as they report that six percent of all US children and twelve percent of black children will experience out-of-home placement by the time they turn 18 which is why their study suggests that "a focus on reducing the negative educational consequences of OHP placement maybe misplaced" (p. e115) as they did not find a causal relationship between placement in care and achievement. However, they indicate that children in care "are likely to have experienced disadvantages associated with lower school achievement" (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015, p. e112).

The Invisible Gap is another study that exposes much about the challenge in that it shows how a state (California) that prided itself on a commitment to providing high-quality public education to all students still failed to take into consideration a significant group because of a detrimental lack of information on their academic performance. As a distinct subgroup, foster children were invisible to educators and child welfare agencies.

The report showed that although foster care students in the K-12 school system were at a disadvantage and showed poor academic achievement and education outcomes, they "can also be amazingly resilient, and when they receive adequate academic and social supports, they can persist and succeed in school" (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 42). The following year, Weigmann, Putnam-Horstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell (2014) reported that "classroom teachers and



other educators are generally unaware of students' foster care status . . . due to challenges related to availability, collection and sharing of information about these students between the education and child welfare systems . . . . the education needs of these students have been unstudied and unrecognized." (p. 1). The recommendation is that to address the "distressing achievement gap" and this education crisis, it is vital to "ensure that educators and policymakers become aware of students in foster care as a distinct at-risk student population that is similar to but different from other at-risk student subgroups" (Barrat & Berliner, 2013, p. 42).

In 2015, the University of Wisconsin-Madison published a study based on longitudinal data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Multi sample person Files housed at the Institute for Research on Poverty at the university to analyze the relationship between out-of-home placement and academic achievement. The study observed children before, during, and after care compared with children of the same social and economic status.

The study found "no differences in achievement by the level of CPS involvement; all CPS involved children seem to perform similarly . . . . Suggestive evidence that children perform slightly worse in the early stages of placement or during short placements than after being in care for a longer period" (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015, p. 115).

The University of Oregon – despite being not representative of the foster care population due to the fact the sampling was from a medium-sized metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest with primarily Caucasian participants. – shows that foster children were six times more likely to make multiple moves and four times more likely to move during the school year and change districts. The University of Oregon and the Oregon Social Learning Center were hoping for a better understanding of school moves to see if they could figure out strategies to mitigate the negative impact of school mobility. In an earlier study, Mehana and Reynolds have already

established that mobile students are four months behind their peers in reading and math achievement. Previous studies have identified school mobility as a possible factor in foster care students' poor academic performance. There are indications that early life adversity can explain academic failure.

Another study proposed that you can mitigate the effect of school mobility by ensuring that "early learning and literacy skills are adequate to prepare them for the demand of kindergarten" (Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015, p. 1222). That is based on the finding that students with a strong foundation enter school with an advantage. The study recognized that school mobility has been a possible factor in the low educational performance of foster children and suggested that a better understanding of the moves could help policymakers and practitioners ameliorate adverse effects. Consistent with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Improvement Act, the study suggests, "School and child welfare systems might be able to prevent some school moves by coordinating transportation efforts" (Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015, p. 1223).

In Colorado, another study sought to examine how school change in grades 9 to 12 predicts educational attainment by reviewing data from four cohorts of high school students to understand the complex relationship between school mobility and educational achievement. The study discussed systemic issues or barriers hindering educational attainment in the K-12 education system. Through Every Student Succeed Act of 2001 and the fostering Connection Act of 2008, foster children have the right to remain in the school of origin. However, the decision is made based on what the child welfare agency deems to be in the child's best interest.

It is vital to mitigate the adverse effects of school mobility on educational attainment.

However, this study could not confirm whether school mobility causally affected educational attainment. The relationship is complex as the data suggested that "the more frequently students in foster care change schools, the less likely they are to exit the k-12 educational system successfully" (Clemens, Lalonde, Sheesley, 2016, p. 198). The literature and the data from this study suggest that those frequent changes impact achievement.

According to Coleman, school is "a unique source of social stability and thus social capital – a source that diminishes as school mobility increases" (Clemens, Lalonde, Sheesley, 2016, p. 195). To mitigate the impact of school mobility, those researchers proposed services to address the gap in learning and coordination among local child welfare agencies and schools.

### **An Exploration of Best Practices**

Berardi and Morton see foster care students as the most academically vulnerable group of learners, an invisible population with complex needs due to abuse and neglect. They portray that population as facing significant trials with "a divided focus between survival, working through the challenges of state custody and academics" (Berardi & Morton, 2017, p. 10). The study recognized that 25% of foster children are at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder with severe implications for educators. Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, and Halfon (2014) showed in their study that the problem is even more prevalent, with "48 percent of US children have had at least one of the nine key adverse childhood experiences" (p. 2109). Children with two or more adverse childhood experiences were found to be "2.67 times more likely to repeat a grade in school . . . Resilience mitigated the impact of adverse childhood experiences on grade repetition and school engagement" (Bethell, Newacheck, Hawes, and Halfon, 2014, p. 2111).

Another study out of Vermont recognized resilience as "an important aspect of a child's social-emotional development and has implication for academic performance, school

completion, and . . . needs to be fostered through a combination of supportive relationships, adaptive skill buildings and positive experiences” (Kasehagen, Omland, Bailey, Biss, Holmes, and Kelso, 2017, p. 304).

While schools are under increasing pressure to answer for K-12 students who do not perform at grade level, Berardi and Morton (2017) suggested schools are "ill-equipped to understand the needs of the traumatized child" (p. 11). However, the study noticed a growing movement toward creating trauma-informed schools. They argued that recovery from trauma requires a community-based approach to repairing relational injuries as a prerequisite and co-occurring with academic achievement. The argument is that "the nature and severity of need requires a systemic change within school districts, not just adjustments within a single classroom" (P. 14).

Case in point: Vermont. The state recognized that “a positive school environment that is welcoming, supportive, and responsive to the needs of all students is essential in addressing the social and emotional needs of students . . . and ultimately to improve academic performance” (Kasehagen, Omland, Bailey, Biss, Holmes, and Kelso, 2017, p. 305).

Nevertheless, school transformation cannot happen just in the context of the classroom or just by changing mere teaching practices. It is a systemic change that happens at the district level to create a trauma-informed environment through:

- A paradigm shift regarding the purpose and function of the school,
- A commitment to learn about the interconnectedness between safe and secure relationships, neurological development, learning, and pro-social behaviors and the response thereof.
- Ongoing and working partnerships with parents, students, and school personnel,

- Ongoing collaboration with trauma-informed experts

School personnel should utilize the following strategies:

- Curiosity and compassion for the life circumstances of each student,
- Unwavering acceptance of each child, regardless of student's successes or failures,
- Overtly addressing in each class, the culture of care,
- A view of discipline or structure as a method of providing safety to self and others while affirming the student's ability to learn less harmful coping measures.

The University of Chicago conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based universal social and emotional (SEL) programs that reveal that policymakers, educators, and the public can contribute to children's healthy development by incorporating evidence-based SEL programming into standard educational practice. The article recognizes that schools face the challenges of a culturally diverse student population with varied abilities and motivation for learning but found that "schools have an important role to play in raising healthy children by fostering not only their cognitive development but also their social and emotional development" (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011, p. 406).

School can play a critical role in changing the dynamic of this subgroup. Schwartz has long submitted that "schools have great potential to serve as safe and stable environments in the lives of youths in out-of-home care" (Tyre, 2012, p.231).

Skilbred, Iversen, and Moldestad (2017) conducted a fascinating study in Norway. The context is different in that the foster care system is based on the family model with the ability to provide a better home environment for the foster care child. However, their conclusion that a "school has the potential to enhance resilience through supporting children's competence and self-efficacy and through providing them with better opportunities in adulthood" (p. 356) was

telling. More to the point was the finding that the environment that supported school achievement presented three characteristics:

1. It promotes a feeling of belonging.
2. It emphasizes core values such as taking school seriously and giving one's best.
3. It offers order and structure.

That study showed that the notion of setting expectations was critical. It found that those foster care students were required and expected "to give their best at school. The foster parents had developed reward systems for improving grades at school. These systems were not based on achievement of the best grades but a relative improvement. . . . foster parents aimed at communicating that their children could become whatever they wanted, but that it required work" (Skilbred, Iversen, & Moldestad, 2017, p 364).

### **Gap in the Literature**

The latest report of the Results-Oriented Accountability Program – established in 2014 to produce an assessment of the system of care, monitor and measure the use of resources and develop and maintain inclusive, interactive, and evidence-based programs of quality improvement – indicated an increase in Florida child's population of 1.8% while the United States population is decreasing by 0.5%. In the meantime, the workload of dependency workers has increased in the last five years in a state that has seen an increase in the entry rate into the foster care system in the last four fiscal years, much higher than the national average.

Currently, there is no system to track and assess the performance of foster care children among the K-12 population. Like California in 2013, Florida has not been able to collect accurate information on the performance of this vulnerable population.

A needs assessment would be critical to understanding the challenges of foster care children in Florida to determine the assistance needed to help them perform better.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

The literature review shows that foster care children constitute a unique subgroup of low-performing students whose needs have been ignored and remained unaddressed because of a systemic failure to coordinate the actions of social work agencies and the school system to ensure the children's safety. Inasmuch as they experienced trauma and instability, a school can provide the right environment for academic achievement. This is consistent with the school's mandate to provide an equitable opportunity to all students.

## **Chapter III - METHODOLOGY**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of foster children as a distinct and silent subgroup of academically at-risk students with unique characteristics to find effective strategies to create a healthy school ecosystem that practices educational equity. Beyond that, the purpose is also to ensure equitable outcomes for students in foster care in the hope of helping close the achievement gap.

### **Philosophical Perspective**

The researcher's worldview - as it relates to this study - aligns with the transformative approach to provide "a voice for these participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve their lives" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9) through a focus on the needs of foster care students in the K-12 school system.

The research seeks to highlight issues of unequal access to resources and alienation of a group identified as a "silent and significant subgroup." The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning reported in 2013 on an "invisible achievement gap" in discussing the plight of foster children within the California school system.

Our literature review had shown that foster children lag their peers in educational attainment with unmet and unrecognized needs that amount to educational neglect, as indicated in the California study. They experience formidable challenges, including persistent low expectations, lack of specialized services, and frequent educational transitions, which increase their risk of adverse school outcomes. 87% - according to Clemens and colleagues (2016) – are below grade level in math when entering high school. They score below on standardized tests.



They have a high rate of grade retention, higher rates of absenteeism, tardiness, truancy, and dropout.

The California study – among others – had indicated that foster children start school below grade level and continue to fall further behind. So, the problem begins before they even enter the system. To make matters worse, they have gone through a series of traumatic experiences that impact their learning which require – as indicated by Barat and Berliner (2013)– multiple years of successful interventions to catch up to grade-level standards.

The California study and others reviewed by this researcher show foster care children as a distinct subgroup of academically at-risk students. While enhanced academic performance is not a primary foster care goal, schools are ill-equipped to deal with foster care children's unmet and unrecognized needs. The current study seeks to highlight the uniqueness of the group and the resources needed to help them achieve.

From that perspective, the study assumes an issue of educational equity. The question becomes then how to ensure a school ecosystem that allows ongoing assessment of unmet and unrecognized needs of foster children to provide adequate resources that ensure equitable academic outcomes.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This researcher assumes one of the barriers to educational attainment among foster care students is their adverse childhood experiences, which the schools have failed to consider in planning their education. Since the so-called ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study, it has been established that trauma leads to adverse educational outcomes. Furthermore, issues of confidentiality and record sharing impede a thorough assessment of foster care students. Foster

care students are considered a highly protected group, and this study seeks to overcome systemic barriers for a comprehensive assessment of their needs.

This dissertation study addresses two fundamental research questions:

1. What strategies could help schools identify the needs and barriers of foster children?
2. What tools are needed to help foster children mitigate educational transitions and adverse childhood experiences to improve academic performance?

### **Key Variables**

In the context of this study, this researcher looks at educational attainment as an independent variable. In the context of emancipating foster youth, educational attainment is defined as securing high school credentials and having the ability to take on the challenge of pursuing postsecondary education based on aspirations and dreams. This study looks at educational attainment from an ecological perspective to embrace trauma-informed teaching practices to help foster children achieve.

To that effect, the current study considers those dependent variables:

1. Student engagement – How can schools engage foster care students through proper and timely assessment and record sharing to empower them to take charge of their education plan?
2. Student motivation – How can schools help students remain motivated through the utmost levels of self-esteem in pursuing their dreams?
3. Relatedness – How can schools create a space that allows a greater sense of belonging for foster care students?

4. Self-regulation – How can schools help foster care students assume responsibility for their journeys and hold them accountable?

### **Description of Population and Sample**

This study seeks to give voice to foster care students as a marginalized group for positive educational outcomes. The transformative worldview allows such inquiry to be "intertwined with politics and a political change agenda to confront social oppression" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9). This researcher understands the challenge of interviewing children in care and the complexity or difficulty of reaching them. Therefore, he will identify successful foster care alumni to participate. The foster care alumni would have graduated from the South Florida K-12 public school system.

Foster care students are an extremely hard-to-reach population. Focusing on successful foster youth alumni will help overcome the systematic barriers to students. The study defines successful foster youth as one over 21 who have earned at least a bachelor's degree and maintains stable employment and income.

More than that, the study considers other groups with varying perspectives on the challenges. The researcher had interviewed subject matter experts such as educational leaders and/or administrators, advocates, and guardian ad litem to get insights on policy initiatives and their implementations. The researcher had sought the perspectives of those directly involved with policy implementation at the district level to understand shortcomings and systemic barriers to being addressed.

Dependency Case Managers can help understand frequent transitions and school disruptions. The study sought insights from seasoned Dependency Case Managers to understand the approach of the dependency care system to educational attainment as it is one of its

mandates. By seasoned DCM, the study refers to those working in the system for over five to ten years.

The researcher had hoped for a proportional stratified sample size of teachers from the Florida Department of Education for a needs assessment survey through Survey Monkey to assess the classroom environment in which foster care students pursue educational goals. The goal was to survey current teachers and school personnel involved with foster care students to get their viewpoints on the challenges. The cross-sectional survey would have allowed us to get a description of classroom teachers' trends, attitudes, and opinions "to test association among variables" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 147).

This study used single-stage sampling procedure, which "is ideal when it is impossible or impractical to compile a list of the elements composing the population" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 150). The clustering procedure had allowed the researcher to access names in the population and sample the elements directly. To that effect, the current study has used convenient sampling. Although it is a "less desirable, but often used" sampling where "respondents are chosen based on their convenience and availability" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 150).

### **Design of the Study**

Again, because of a paucity of data on the academic performance of foster care students, this researcher has used a qualitative case study design to draw an accurate picture of the academic challenges foster care students face within the K-12 educational system.

Creswell & Creswell (2018) rightfully argued that case studies are a design of inquiry found in many fields, especially evaluation, in which the researcher develops an in-depth analysis" (p. 14). This design gives the option and flexibility to draw an accurate picture of the

challenges and inquire about an ecosystem that would facilitate the improvement of the academic performance of our foster children. It gives the opportunity "to collect data in the field at the site . . . through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 181).

The researcher believes that foster care alumni who have beaten the odds to earn - at least - a bachelor's degree and maintain gainful employment (stable work and payment) have valuable information they can share in terms of tools that help them overcome their traumatic experiences and journeys to thrive. They can offer a forward-looking critique of the school and dependency care systems as they relate to academic achievement. The researcher will conduct face-to-face interviews with them to get their insight into the journey.

It is also essential to interview Dependency Case Managers responsible for coordinating services for foster care children to understand the dynamics of the dependency care system and the barriers to legislative mandates. They have a unique perspective also of the academic struggle of foster care children that can shed light on the challenge. The researcher will conduct qualitative interviews to elicit their views and opinions on the challenges.

School districts have responsibilities to provide specific services to students, including but not limited to foster care students. Often time references are made to 504 plans and Individual Educational Plans. It would be interesting to understand their perspectives on the challenges and barriers they face in meeting legislative mandates related to foster care students. Ergo, this researcher is interested in talking to either the Foster Care Liaison at the School District or the Chief Academic Officer for insights on their perception of the challenges and understanding of the system in place to assist foster care students.

With respect to the sampling size, the study will not restrict itself to a specific number. The researcher believes in a saturation process whereby “one stops collecting data when the categories (or themes) are saturated: when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 186). To that effect, the researcher will collect data until it is determined that there is nothing else to discover.

This design is consistent with the transformative worldview to give voices to marginalized groups by providing them with an opportunity to discuss their lived experiences and share thoughts and ideas on how to move forward and improve conditions.

### **Participants**

The researcher will request a teacher’s listing (Appendix A) from the Florida Department of Education to generate a group of teachers and use a single-stage cluster sampling to identify participants in this group.

The researcher will work with local welfare agencies to identify seasoned dependency case managers who can provide insights into their dealing with foster care children, educational agencies, and successful foster care alumni. An email (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the research had been sent to local welfare agencies working with foster care youth and dependency case managers or independent living specialists to recruit those alumni. A flyer (Appendix C) had been designed and posted on Facebook and LinkedIn.

The study will target foster care alumni 21 and up who have been through the K-12 educational system, earned at least a bachelor's degree, and have a reliable job and stable housing to investigate the practical strategies that have helped them achieve academically.

The researcher will also identify educational leaders and administrators for one-on-one interviews to discuss policy initiatives and their implementations in South Florida. Through

student services, this researcher will identify those participants from the district web portal. An invitation email (Appendix E) will be sent to them to participate in the interviews at a mutually convenient time.

### **Instrumentation and Data Source**

#### ***Semi-Structured Audio-Taped Interviews***

**Successful Foster Care Alumni.** The researcher developed semi-structured interviews (Appendix G) that will be audio taped on two devices to get insights from foster youth who have overcome barriers to thrive and succeed academically to explore the strategies that have made a difference. The conversation with the foster youth alumni will center around their experiences in the K-12 school system and the support that helped them overcome barriers and challenges. For example, we will ask them:

1. Describe how your childhood experience with trauma and involvement with the dependency care system impacted your learning.
2. Describe your experience with the K-12 public school system
3. What were some of the key factors to your success?
4. What was your experience with transitions and school instabilities?

**Subject Matter Experts.** The researcher will interview subject matter experts such as educational leaders and advocates to get insights on school mandates related to foster children and assess current processes of assessing and meeting their needs (Appendix H). This group will help provide critical insights into the current system to help foster care students achieve their educational goals. The goal is to determine their understanding of legislative mandates related to the education of foster care students and the resources devoted to implementing said mandates. Some of the questions are:

1. What resources are available in your district to ensure fair access to high-quality education to foster students?
2. Is there a tracking system in place with disaggregated data on the performance of foster children in your district?
3. How do you coordinate with the dependency care system to meet the needs of foster care children?

**Dependency Case Workers.** The perspective of dependency caseworkers must be considered in assessing the needs of foster care children related to their educational pursuits. The researcher is interested in documenting their perception of the challenges and their experiences accessing resources within the school system. The study will conduct interviews with dependency case workers (Appendix I) to get their insights. It will give varying perspectives on the impact of transitions and school disruptions. Some of the questions for this group are:

1. What is your mandate related to the education of foster care students?
2. What has been your experience with the transfer of school records during transitions?
3. What happened with missed instructional times caused by unplanned transitions and interruptions due to court appointments?
4. Is there real synchronization of services between dependency care systems and educational agencies to help foster care students achieve?

### *Online Survey*

**Teachers and/or Guidance Counselors.** This researcher developed an online survey (appendix J), a mix of Likert scale and open-ended questions that will be distributed through survey monkey to gain insights from teachers and Guidance Counselors on needed resources to



create a healthy environment that recognizes foster students as a distinct subgroup of academically at-risk students using Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) to ensure academic achievement. That may help develop a strategy tool for schools hoping to accommodate their students in foster care. The Likert scale choices are:

1. My school has a strong culture of engaging and welcoming foster children
2. When a foster child in my classroom has court hearings, I am notified in advance and given an opportunity to help the student catch up on missing instruction time
3. At my school, the teacher is given sufficient information to assess the needs of the foster care student.

The questions will assess the readiness of teachers to meet the social and emotional needs of the foster care student. However, they will help understand the school's dynamic in creating a learning community to help close the achievement gap. The researcher will disseminate the survey for a month to emails from the department of education.

### **Quality of the Data**

#### ***Validity and Reliability***

This study will use triangulation to test the integrity of the inferences drawn. That will help us “build a coherent justification for themes . . . . Based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 200). The various sources of this study would be interviews, surveys, and observation.

Each targeted group for this study offers a different vantage point. Triangulation allows us to project a complete picture of the challenge in the hope of a more effective alternative.

The validity and reliability of the instruments may be tested using Cronbach’s Alpha to measure internal consistency (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As stated in Creswell and Creswell

(2018), “internal consistency is the degree to which sets of items on an instrument behave in the same way. This is important because items in the instrument should assess the same underlying construct. As such, the internal consistency is quantified by a Cronbach’s alpha value ranging between 0 and 1, with optimal values ranging between .7 and .9” (p. 153). Cronbach alpha will be calculated using SPSS Statistics.

### ***Biases***

Since 2017, this researcher has worked with emancipated foster youth to facilitate a successful transition into responsible adulthood. He has seen firsthand the plight of those youngsters going through their educational pursuits with low expectations from caregivers and school personnel, as well as the personal confusion, helplessness, and hopelessness that doom their prospects. As they "age out" of the dependency care system, the expectation is that they complete their high school diploma with the guarantee of financial support for postsecondary education. However, because they often underperform, it is not easy to benefit from those additional supports.

This experience places the researcher in the unique position of being a witness of the academic journey of some foster youth. He has a strong sense of what is not working. In acknowledging the bias, the researcher hopes to be mindful of his predisposition and allow the discovery of facts to dictate the path of this study. This researcher has worked with foster students as a case manager tasked with helping them navigate the educational and welfare systems to secure better opportunities. The researcher will make sure the discovery of facts guides the study and not forgone conclusions or preconceived notions.

### ***Trustworthiness***

The design of the study calls for various perspectives to understand the plight of foster care students in the K-12 school system. The researcher will interview foster care alumni, district administrators/leaders, and dependency case managers. From the theme we identified from those interviews, we can easily triangulate. The open-ended questions prompt participants to elaborate on specific aspects of the journey.

### **Data Collection**

Once the Institutional Review Board of Lynn University approves the research protocol, the researcher will use purposeful sampling to identify and recruit Dependency Case Managers, educational leaders, and/or administrators. The researcher will email (Appendix B) agencies currently working with foster care children and publish a very well-designed flyer (Appendix C) to post on social media such as Facebook and LinkedIn to recruit successful foster care alumni within the description of this study.

The researcher will screen the group generated and obtain contact information such as email address and phone number to verify eligibility. Then, a list of ten participants would be generated from that group. From the email sent to social agencies, the researcher will also generate a list of six seasoned dependency case workers to interview. The email to school/district administrators and leaders (Appendix D) will help identify key personnel at the district level responsible for implementing policies and coordinating services to foster care students. Individual interviews will be scheduled at the participant's convenience on zoom. The consent form (Appendix F) will be submitted via email and collected before the interview. At the beginning of the interview, the researcher will review the consent to ensure understanding.

Once the interview is conducted, the response will be transcribed, and the researcher will email each participant at this level to ensure responses have been accurately reported. Email addresses would have already been collected upon the selection of participants.

The interview with dependency case managers and district leaders will help evaluate the synergy between the dependency care system and the educational system in meeting their mandate related to foster care children.

As indicated earlier, this researcher will identify agencies with a record of accomplishments in terms of their services to foster care children to identify individuals who meet the criteria of educational achievement. Those potential participants will receive correspondence (Appendix E) via email informing them of a study on closing the achievement gap among foster children and presenting it as an opportunity to reach back to foster children and give them a better path to success. A phone call will be placed five days after the email to confirm participation.

The researcher will use several ways to collect the data. He will use qualitative observation by taking field notes in observing behaviors and activities during the interviews. Qualitative interviews and documents will also be utilized to collect a wide range of data. Once the data is collected, the researcher will organize it by themes or types and arrange them to facilitate understanding and analysis. Then the data would be reviewed to assess its credibility. That will lead to the generation of description settings and themes for analysis.

### ***Informed Consent***

Participation in the study is voluntary. Prospective participants will be given informed consent (Appendix F). Candidates who wish to participate will sign the consent form. At any time during the process, the participant is free to withdraw from the study.

This researcher understands the risk of personal bias due to his involvement with the studied population. He will ensure facts are leading his inquiry and monitor his prejudice throughout the process.

Participants will be given informed consent, which will lay out the conditions for participation and guarantee the confidentiality of interviewees and the anonymity of survey participants. It will be made clear that there will be no monetary compensation for participating in the study.

### ***Anonymity and Confidentiality***

Participants in the survey portion of the study shall remain anonymous, and the audio-taped participants' identities will be kept confidential. Answers to survey and interview questions shall remain confidential using a pseudonym in transcribing and reporting answers. All information shared will be confidential except to meet a legal obligation, such as in a case of abuse or suicide risk.

### ***Data Storage***

Information collected during the research study will be kept in a hard drive and locked in storage that only the researcher can access for a minimum of five years. No personal information will be reported and/or released to the public for any reason without written permission in advance.

Interview transcription and informed consent will be locked in a separate secured file cabinet in the researcher's possession.

Surveys will be conducted using Survey Monkey and analyzed by the researcher on a password-protected computer. Interviews will be transcribed and verified for accuracy with the interviewee. All transcriptions and informed consent will be shredded after five years.

## **Data Analysis**

All the data collected from interviews with foster care alumni, dependency case managers, and school district leaders, as well as surveys, will be analyzed using a mixed research design method. The survey data will be entered into statistical software to help the analysis. The researcher will use either excel or SPSS to create charts, tables, and figures for descriptive statistics to test hypotheses and verify the correlation between variables.

The audio-taped zoom interviews with successful foster care alumni, Dependency Case Managers, and District leaders will be transcribed by hand to identify and organize codes and generate themes that would help conclude.

The surveys from teachers will be analyzed for mean, mode, range, and median. The answers will be segregated to generate appropriate tables with numbers and percentages to represent trends visually.

The researcher will then triangulate the themes of all groups of interviewees, survey responses, and observations to make meaning and understand effective strategies for successful foster care experience and assist in answering the overarching research questions.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

The data collection process will be based on a relationship of trust. The researcher will identify suitable participants who could provide reliable information on the historical perspective of the challenge. The criteria for participation have been established and will be verified accordingly. The information given will then be coded into themes for better analysis.

## **Ethical Considerations**

### ***Risks***

In interviewing participants about traumatic events, there is the risk of emotional distress related to the lived experience. At any given time, should the participant feel unable to continue with the process or if a question or response triggers an emotional reaction, the participant will retain the right to withdraw from the study. In such cases, the participants' initial responses will be discarded and destroyed with no adverse consequences to them concerning the study, the researcher, and even the agency referring them. The researcher will make available referrals to adequate mental health counseling services if participants request it.

### ***Benefits***

There are no benefits to participating in this study except that of giving voice to the opinion of a marginalized group and the feeling of helping address a critical issue of equal educational opportunity.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

The current study proposes a case study analysis of the lived experience of foster care students through the K-12 school system to understand mitigating factors and tools needed to ensure academic achievement. The study will survey teachers and interview dependency case managers, foster care alumni, and educational leaders.

## Chapter IV - FINDINGS

### Introduction

This qualitative case study is designed to investigate the lived experiences of foster care students within the K-12 school system setting in South Florida, considering current legislative mandates, national trends, and alarming findings in comparable states. The study looks at a transformational, collective, and distributed leadership approach to propose a healthy school ecosystem that is fair, appropriately resourced, and highly accountable.

The study features interviews with key stakeholders for a forward-looking assessment of current school settings to find effective strategies to close the achievement gap among foster care students. It seeks to answer questions related to effective strategies in identifying the needs and barriers of foster care students as well as tools to mitigate educational transitions and adverse childhood experiences to improve academic success.

To that end, the study gives voice to marginalized groups, the foster care alumni, and the case workers who are often not consulted on policy initiatives. The research also sought insights from subject matter experts (SMEs) who have dealt with the issues for several years and have proximity to the issues at hand. Those SMEs may be guardian ad litem, school district administrators/leaders, advocates, legal advisors, or even scholars with critical insights into the functioning of the dependency care system and the educational system in South Florida.

The chapter discusses the intricacies and burden of the dependency care system in its interaction with the school system considering legislative mandates to identify challenges and areas of growth. It is a forward-looking assessment of needs that will allow for a roadmap that gives voice to concerns of a marginalized population in advocating for an equitable educational



opportunity to mitigate challenges and barriers, including adverse childhood experiences which characterize foster care children.

### **Description of the Sample**

This study targeted four (4) groups:

1. Classroom teachers who interact with the students and could give valuable information related to school settings and teacher self-efficacy in dealing with foster care students.
2. Foster care alumni to reflect on their experience in the K-12 school setting in South Florida.
3. Dependency case managers, successful foster care alumni, and experts in the field.
4. Subject matter experts whose expertise can help make sense of trends and patterns observed.

The criteria for recruiting successful foster care alumni were very challenging. It was difficult to recruit them for the study because there is no consistent system to track them once they leave the Extended Foster Care program. The researcher looked for alumni who attended K-12 in South Florida, had a bachelor's degree, and maintained gainful employment. Although challenging, this researcher was able to recruit eight alumni to participate. Three (3) of them graduated from Palm Beach County, and the other five (5) graduated from Broward County. Five alumni have a bachelor's degree, one has a master's degree, and another is working towards a master's degree.

Part of the challenge is the age at which they enter care and the childhood experience they endured. Five entered care before they turned ten years old, and three (2) entered care

before turning 16 years old. The reasons for removing them overlapped. But this researcher identified four (4) primary reasons: two alumni were homeless as their biological parents were going through challenges that caused them to be on the streets with nowhere to go. Two others were dealing with substance abuse/neglect/physical and sexual violence. Three were sheltered because of domestic violence. It is essential to note that some of those dealing with violence were also dealing with substance abuse. Two of them were recent immigrants living with stepparents and/or siblings who could not easily accommodate and eventually ran away or called themselves in.

The researcher had access to a pool of 198 dependency workers from Palm Beach County and 392 from Broward County. Those workers work from various departments and hold different functions, including but not limited to Dependency Case Manager (DCM), Intake Placement, Lead Dependency Case Manager, DCM Supervisor, and Director of Case Management.

In Miami-Dade, the lead agency communicated to this researcher that its leadership was not interested in participating in the study despite the reassurance that the workers would not speak on behalf of the agency. No explanation was given as to the reason for the decision. Other participants have speculated it could be due to concerns over privacy issues or that the case workers were so frustrated and overwhelmed allowing them to participate would be prejudicial to provision of services.

Invitation to participate was subsequently sent to thirty-one dependency workers in Palm Beach, forty-one in Broward, and two in Miami Dade. The selection was based on those who meet the criteria of a minimum of five years of experience. Because of the turnover rate, it was challenging to restrict this group to Dependency Case Managers (DCM) with five years of experience. The researcher interviewed one DCM, one Lead DCM, seven DCM supervisors, two

Directors of Case Management, one Program Officer, and a former Case Manager. Seven workers were from Palm Beach, and six were from Broward County. Those participants have worked in the dependency care system for four and a half years to 18 years.

The subject matter experts (SMEs) were recruited among active advocacy groups in the area. The SMEs were comprised of two legal experts, two guardian ad litem, four advocates, three district administrators, and one education specialist. The researcher had a pool of twenty-two SMEs and interviewed four from Palm Beach, two from Broward, and six from Miami Dade.

### **Data Collection Timeline**

Once IRB approval was secured, this researcher sent an email invitation to twenty-one local agencies in the hope of identifying potential participants. Those agencies ranged from school districts, community-based agencies, advocacy groups, group homes, and Legal Aid Services. Participants also had an opportunity to recommend other participants in their fields. An email was sent to the Bureau of Educator Certification of the Florida Department of Education for a public records request to obtain a list of K-12 teachers in Palm Beach, Broward, and Miami-Dade Counties.

Within a week of sending the recruitment emails, the researcher followed up with phone calls to ensure receipt of the invitation and discuss the process. The agencies were expected to invite people who met our criteria to participate in the study. It was not an easy sale. Some agencies declined because such an initiative – although they were asked to consent to share contact information or forward the invitation to potential participants – would constitute a breach of privacy. Some refused based on the assumption that foster care alumni would not be interested

in discussing their past. Those agencies were more interested in having their executive officers giving us a sense of what is the challenge.

The researcher secured a list of dependency case workers from Palm Beach and Broward Counties. The goal was to recruit case managers with five years of experience. Upon contacting several agencies, the researcher was advised that the high turnover rate would make it difficult to identify enough case managers with that much experience. Consequently, the researcher sent an invitation to participate to selected case workers, including case managers, lead case managers, and Director of Case Management. Shortly after that, he followed up with phone calls. Many did not even read the invite because the agency was undergoing trainings related to phishing emails. Employees were cautious with emails from unknown sources. Some admitted having received the invitation but were too busy to open it. We then re-sent the invitation to those who agreed to consider it. Some of the workers were apprehensive and wanted to consult with their supervisors because of concerns over privacy issues despite guarantees that the study would not ask for information on individual clients.

By mid-June, the Bureau of Certification of the Florida Department of Education had generated an invoice of \$521.13 for the public record request, which was paid subsequently. However, as of the time of writing these findings, the department informed the researcher that the request was still being processed and would take longer than anticipated due to backlog.

In mid-May, several of the subject matter experts – aware of the researcher's difficulty in getting into the dependency care system in Miami – volunteered their help to identify participants in Dade County to no avail. The researcher was given the contact information of one of the supervisors at the Lead Agency to forward the invitation. The email was sent promptly. When contacted by phone, the person indicated he needed to bring this to the attention of the

agency's leadership for approval. By August the 3rd, the contact person informed the researcher that the agency's leadership decide not to participate in the study.

Scheduling interviews was challenging. From June 5 to August 5, 2022, the researcher conducted interviews with participants mostly via zoom. Recruiting alumni presented serious challenges as the lead agencies could not successfully help with the outreach. Dependency case workers had scheduling issues that interfered with participating in the interviews.

The researcher established protocol to authenticate the reported information. Upon completing the transcriptions, this researcher sent them back to the interviewees for review and verification. Most subject matter experts and alumni could follow up but not the dependency case workers who were too busy responding to emergencies.

### **The Findings of the Study**

The findings of this study are consistent with the findings of the California studies and what this researcher observed in the literature review related to the performance of foster care students.

In South Florida, foster care students face unbelievable challenges such as unsafe home situations, removal, separation, and frequent placement. Information about their performance in school is not shared and collected in a meaningful way to allow for an accurate assessment of needs.

This study finds that they enter care with deficits that – often – are not addressed, which can cause delays in services or response to intervention. Overall, the study reveals that Florida is facing a challenge as practitioner share a sense of contentment and fatalism that defies the goal of educational attainment and mandates that are rendered impracticable by fait accompli.

Followed is a discussion of the findings:

*The Current Modus Operandi: A False Sense of Contentment and Fatalism Handicap Action Towards Ambitious Goals of Academic Achievement*

The current system of care approaches the education of foster care students with a detrimental sense of contentment and fatalism in dealing with a perceived foster care students' underperformance as a *fait accompli*. As you talk to advocates, case managers, and executives across the board, you can easily detect a fatalism over the prospect of those children. Consequently, the expectation is to hope they graduate high school. A case manager admits, "High school is huge to us" (DCM023, personal communication, June 10, 2022). The lead agencies in the three counties considered for this study celebrate high school graduation annually as a testament to the perceived sense that graduation is the expected milestone.

There are incentives for foster care students to pursue postsecondary education, such as free tuition and lodging assistance. However, this low expectation deters them from pushing foster care students through college or even seeing it as a realistic goal. That sense also explains why lead agencies could not help with recruiting successful foster care alumni consistent with the profile of this study.

**No Credible Provision for Adverse Childhood Experiences.** The literature review has already established foster care students have been impacted by trauma. From the pool of alumni of this study, the statements revealed instances of continued abuse and gross neglect early in their lives. The scars of past abuse are self-evident, and they live with a sense of abandonment and betrayal. They come into care "with no parent at home guiding them . . . with the perception the adults in their lives do not care about them and behave as such" (DCM052, personal communication, June 23, 2022). A seasoned case manager made the point that their "lives are blown up, and we expect them – unfairly – to continue to go on like nothing happened . . . the

furthest thing in their mind is school” (DCM073, personal communication, July 1, 2022).

Another one explained that when those children were first traumatized, "their mind is not fully developed, and we expect them to fully function in our school system” (DCM039, personal communication, June 7, 2022).

There is no resource available in the school districts that would provide for their traumatic experiences. There is no unique set of resources for them except the district foster care liaison and the school designee. A team meeting is held before transitioning a child into a new school to consider the child's best interest. That would be the only instance where the traumatic experience could have been considered, but the teacher is absent. Although there may have been some training on trauma-informed care, it is more like a buzzword that fails to take into account the intricacies and uniqueness of the students in their classrooms. After all, teachers do not even have access to relevant information on the foster care status of their students or their exposure to trauma.

**The Seed of Instability.** The system of care is, first and foremost, a complex web of agencies attempting to provide some sense of normalcy to a traumatized child in the hope of reunification. The child is dealing with the court system, the dependency care system, the school system, and -at times – the juvenile detention system. At the very beginning, the goal is to reunite the child with his/her birth family. A plan of care is developed for up to three years, contingent upon the diligence of the biological parents in meeting actual benchmarks set by the dependency court system. At times, reunification may fail. The child then reenters the system. The court can terminate parental rights, and the child may eventually be adopted.

Once in care, a dependency case manager is assigned to facilitate the coordination of services. The responsibility of the case manager will vary, consistent with the type of placement of the child, whether in relative care, nonrelative care, or a group home.

When the child is placed in relative care, the case manager's role is that of an overseer who may - at times - advise the caregiver on effective strategies to advocate for the child and available resources to assist the child. The system then relies on the goodwill and diligence of the parents to assist the child in pursuing his/her academic goals.

The case manager takes on a more significant role when the child is in a nonrelative care setting. The case manager is responsible for service coordination, from dependency care services to educational goals. They are helping the caregiver understand and fulfill their obligations while ensuring the child receives appropriate service. They play a critical role in the success of the child. The caseload of the case manager can be overwhelming, ranging from 32 to 160. In so many ways, they become parents. Nevertheless, a seasoned case manager admits, "we are not ideal parents" (DCM023, personal communication, June 10, 2022) as she discussed the turnover rate, which threatens the continuity of service. The turnover rate is attributed to the low pay of the position but also the hostile environment in which the case manager becomes the scapegoat.

The removal of a child is a measure of last resort. The system tries to keep children at home if services can be provided to parents and children. In some instances, law enforcement is empowered "to reach out to a non-custodial parent, relatives, and friends" (DCM066, personal communication, June 13, 2022) to determine placement. If there is a need to remove them, the system will attempt to place them with relatives to the extent possible. "There is an effort to look for relatives" (DCM039, personal communication, June 7, 2022), then out-of-home care (nonrelatives, licensed care, therapeutic group home, foster medical home, or group care). While



the systems are trying to work towards permanency, that child is at the mercy of the dependency care system in trying against all odds to maintain a certain level of normalcy which is not always possible.

Within twenty-four hours of a child being removed from their home, a shelter hearing will be held in front of a Circuit Court Judge to address the allegation of abuse that warranted the removal. The judge mostly agrees with the investigator concerning the abuse allegations. A seasoned DCM explained that “9 out of 10 times they will agree with the determination made by the PI” (DCM052, personal communication, June 23, 2022). Furthermore, an arraignment will be held within 30 days from the day of removal, consistent with chapter 39 of the Florida Statutes. Subsequently, a case plan will be developed to address the issues of concern and set specific goals for the parties involved. Adjudicatory hearings and disposition hearings may be held to finalize the case plan.

Every six months, the court will hold a judicial review hearing to review visitation rights, case plan goals, and other issues related to the purpose of reunification within twelve months. However, it can take up to three years at times. Failure by the parents to meet the goals set in the case plan could result in the termination of parental rights, permanent guardianship, and/or adoption.

The process creates instability whereby the child is not sure – at least for three years – of what his/her future will look like.

**Lack of Intentional Synergy Across Systems to Ensure Academic Success: Silos and Fractured Collaborative Relationships.** The collaborative relationship between the agencies involved is described as “fractured” because the systems function in silos with “cult-like

attributes.” The relationship is said to be “more procedural than quality improvement,” whereby everyone tries to perform a specific task without regard to effectiveness or emerging needs.

For instance, there is a mandated multidisciplinary staffing meeting to be held within five days of removal to determine the child's best interest related to school placement. That has been seen as a positive development to ensure school stability. However, practitioners and advocates still feel communication is not where it should be despite an interagency agreement that provides ways to collaborate and share information. It is still a system where “we are just trying to remove red tapes” (SME013, personal communication, June 16, 2022) and failed to consider issues related to improving educational outcomes as the systems are “not necessarily paying attention to academic record” (SME021, personal communication, July 5, 2022).

One advocate sums it up best: “We are relying on the school system to teach kids who happened to be in foster care with no parent available to guide them” (SME018, personal communication, June 27, 2022). In the last few years, the systems have tried to accommodate the needs of foster care students. However, experts still feel it is “frustrating to work with the system,” it is “hard to get things done,” and they describe the system as overwhelming. A Dependency Case Manager explained, “when we work together, it is a beautiful thing.” An expert coordinating with the systems admitted that the systems have failed to “tackle the question of quality improvement.” She later observed there is “no consistent support system to reinforce the importance of education. What the child was ingrained with prior to coming into care is what they have” (SME013, personal communication, June 16, 2022).

Despite the existence of an interagency agreement, seasoned dependency workers do not believe there is intentional synchronization of services, as schools sometimes are difficult to work with. “Absolutely not” (DCM017, personal communication, June 14, 2022), responded one

participant who explained that case managers must go out of their way to explain simple processes as “schools tend to drag their feet” (SME005, personal communication, June 11, 2022) on most things. There is no direct line to the teachers. It takes a lot to get in touch with a teacher.

One of the illustrations of the fractured collaboration is the conundrum with supportive services. Kids enter the dependency care system with deficits that have not been evaluated. Case managers are not allowed to sign consent to get an Individualized Educational Plan. Every so often, you may be in a situation where a child needs an IEP yet stays in limbo as no one is available to sign for the request. One legal expert explained how clients were almost kicked out of schools because their needs were not being met and no educational surrogate were appointed. If the parental rights have not been terminated, that parent is still involved, but sometimes getting their collaboration may be challenging. One legal expert suggested that “the appointment of an educational surrogate is a shared responsibility between the court and the school district” (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022).

But the lack of coordination causes serious gaps whereby students spend years without legal representation. One student was in licensed care for about eight years with a speech impediment, no representation, and no supportive services. Children are being suspended and baker acted due to mental health issues, anxiety, and depression. Technically, all students in care should be qualified for a 504 plan but the system is not catching them up. Getting an educational surrogate is simple on paper yet complex in practice. There have been cases filed with the Office of Civil Rights as students were kicked out of school because of a failure to identify and evaluate children with known or suspected disabilities affirmatively. As a result, students who need to be screened for services and desperately need support are trying to pursue their educational goals without assistance.

The issue of parental consent is critical as it sometimes leads to delays in services. Should there be a need to go back to court – as it happens at times – a 16-years veteran case worker explains the process may “take months if not years” for the court to settle the issue (DCM023, personal communication, June 10, 2022).

**Inadequate Resources for Foster Care Students.** Resources from the district are scarce. The districts have established a District Liaison office to facilitate collaboration between the lead agencies, the courts, and the schools. Each school has a foster care designee. But the “role remains ambiguous” (DCM013, personal communication, June 13, 2013). Another case manager indicated that "some case managers do not even know we have them" (DCM017, personal communication, June 14, 2022). An upper-level worker stated that “youth do not necessarily know who that person is, usually a secondary title. . . . I don’t think they’re helpful” (SME013, June 16, 2022). Those designees are a secondary title given to a principal, an assistant principal, or a guidance counselor with no “statutory protection” (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022).

Broward County has been very proactive in listing the names of their foster care school designee with contact information. Other counties have not been as open. A director of case management - who has been working in the system since 2011 - admitted to having never met a foster care designee. A veteran supervisor indicates that some case managers do not know about the school liaison and how to reach them.

An advocate submitted that "the challenge with resources is that a very limited people at the school would even know the foster care status of the child . . . unless the student self-disclosed” (SME015, personal communication, June 10, 2022). A consultant suggested that the lack of resources could be attributed to the fact that the subgroup constitutes a small portion of

the student population compared to other subgroups. For instance, Palm Beach County only reports 673 school-age foster care students whereas Broward reports 1,500, and Miami-Dade has 850 students with DCF involvement.

Presently the case manager plays a significant role in the life of the foster care student. A dependency case manager described the case manager as “the middle person trying to bridge the gap.” (DCM005, personal communication, July 1, 2022). However, when it comes to the education of the foster care student, Broward County has a slightly different system where the responsibility primarily lies with the school liaison.

Beyond those positions at the district level and the school level – however ambiguous - foster care students do not get additional resources. Because of budget constraints, “social workers and counselors are limited nowadays in the school system” (SME021, personal communication, July 5, 2022), leading to a “confusing” IEP process. There is an understanding that the lead agency will make a referral for mental health services. However, “it takes 30 days to get a therapist assigned to the child” (DCM020, personal communication, June 30, 2020). A consultant who wears different hats, having been a dependency case manager, a teacher, and a care coordinator, explained that the Individualized Education Plans are “not as individualized as they should” (SME021, personal communication, July 5, 2022). The other challenge is that you may request the IEP meeting, but only a parent or educational surrogate can sign them. Not many of those students end up with a willing and compliant parent or educational surrogate. And this is despite the fact of a School-Based Teams (SBT) meeting to consider “additional needs of students in foster care . . . to identify interventions and supports needed individually as well” (SME001, July 11, 2022).

Simply put, the law is being ignored. The district has a responsibility to provide response to interventions/tiered interventions when a student is not meeting grade level expectations for academics and behavior. School districts must conduct evidence-based evaluations and keep track of them. That is not always the case. Child Find's duty is to affirmatively identify and evaluate children with known or suspected disabilities. But it is difficult to even secure an appointment. A mandatory manifestation determination is required for a child with disability after ten suspensions. Again, the law is not being implemented with fidelity.

All in all, there is "no sophisticated support" in place at the district level for foster students, and one consultant argued that "it is difficult to accommodate because they are a small portion of the student population" (SME019, July 5, 2022). So, when those children are having behavioral issues, "they face suspension, expulsion, or write up instead of a referral to mental health services" (DCM020, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

### **Mandates Challenged by Facts Accomplis**

Some are not even thinking of mandates. Every day, they try to do their best to provide the children under their care the best they can. A seasoned Guardian ad Litem explained, "I do not think in terms of mandates. I do not know them. I just do what a parent would do" (SME005, personal communication, June 11, 2022). Some have a vague idea of those mandates. Others use different terminologies and look at procedures in place.

### ***Educational Stability***

The first challenge to the stability mandate is the demands of parents, who often refuse to compromise. The case manager is tasked with requesting an ESSA meeting within five (5) days to decide school enrollment. The case manager works with the school district foster care liaison to "explore the possibility of the child finishing the year at the school of origin and secure

transportation" (DCM006, personal communication, June 17, 2022). A supervisor with seven years of experience explained that 99 percent of group Homes would not transport to the school of origin. Traditional foster parents sometimes will but often will balk at the responsibility, which means they end up switching schools despite the requirement to keep them at their school of origin. "Parents are making demands based on what is convenient to them . . . They would refuse to drive the student to a new school or will refuse to answer to an emergency . . . we end up choosing schools to appease the parents" (DCM013, personal communication, June 13, 2022).

Florida faces a severe and detrimental foster home shortage, which makes placement very challenging. Transportation is promised but only "when feasible and in the best interest of the child to remain in the school of origin" (SME001, personal communication, July 11, 2022). The lack of sufficient homes within each attendance zone and the frequency of students changing foster homes remain significant challenges to districts. The educational stability is unsustainable or "challenging because of placement issues" (SME013, personal communication, June 16, 2022). A Guardian ad Litem concluded, "unstable placements failed those children" (SME005, personal communication, June 11, 2022).

Securing special transportation for the child may take up to ten business days, "during which time they are dropped off by case manager, caregiver, or stay home" (DCM042, personal communication, June 16, 2022). Moreover, case workers draw the conclusion that "it is not always realistic to keep them in their school of origin" (DCM005, personal communication, July 1, 2022) as mandated. That reality challenges the mandate.

### ***Service Coordination***

According to a legal expert, the responsibility of providing continuity of services related to education lies with the school district. She argues that "when a student is not meeting grade

level expectations for academics and behavior, the school district must conduct evidence-based evaluation and keep track of them" (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022).

However, service coordination – at present – “is contingent upon the due diligence of a case manager . . . A lucky child is a child with an involved case worker” (SME006, personal communication, June 16, 2022). In other words, “the burden of connection to services is being put on the entity that is most overburdened” (SME018, personal communication, June 27, 2022). Even with a dedicated case worker, the school may not be inclined to act on the child's identified needs. Again, it is the notion that schools tend to drag their feet and that it may be easier to just lower expectations by placing the student in a different class rather than accommodating them. The anecdote of the mentor whose mentee was placed in lower-level classes to easily get Bs is telling. The record provided to the mentor did not help understand the challenge of the child. And it is indeed because documentation of student performance is not where it needs to be.

Although the district has “an affirmative obligation to identify and evaluate all children with a known or suspected disability” (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022), many have not been identified despite completing a Comprehensive Behavioral Health Assessment as the child enters care. They enter the system “with a set of deficits based on what is going on in the home” (DCM017, June 14, 2022) that have not been flagged because those kids were never evaluated. Furthermore, because of those undiagnosed deficits, the foster care students developed frustration as they “cannot understand the material we are teaching them, tutoring does not consider their deficits . . . when they start off bad, it is hard to get them to catch up” (DCM039, personal communication, June 7, 2022). Caseworkers see the deficits as a significant challenge in that “the system does not understand the deficits that challenge their learning” (DCM005, personal communication, July 1, 2022)



An evaluation will take anywhere from six months to two years. “You have to jump through hoops to even get an appointment” (DCM020, personal communication, June 30, 2022) with Child Find. Often, the lead agency would resort to private pay for the evaluation through a pediatrician. The school sometimes finds a reason not to evaluate the child, pointing to a sense of normalcy by lowering the bar. A legal expert explained that “there is no net to catch students falling through the cracks,” explaining that “any student in care should be able to qualify for a 504-plan due to anxiety, depression, and trauma, though all may not need one” (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022). Then again, even after the IEP is completed, the primary issue is who signs it since the case manager cannot sign it. The parents may not be willing to facilitate the process, or an educational surrogate may have yet to be appointed.

#### ***No Comprehensive Report on the Performance of Foster Care Students***

There is currently no comprehensive report on the performance of foster care students as a subgroup in South Florida. No one we interviewed could give any credible data on foster care students and their performance except to say that “more than half youth in care are not on target to graduate” (SME021, personal communication, July 5, 2022) or to make vague and unsubstantiated data. The district's foster care office's claim to have data is to be taken with a grain of salt. One school district argues that it “has provided a foster care icon and tracking process to gather data for students in foster care” (SME001, personal communication, July 11, 2022) as part of the Student Information System. Another district employee explained, “there are indicators in the system that could help generate needed data on the performance given specific parameters” (SME008, personal communication, June 9, 2022). The districts track foster care students “for educational review and linkage. But . . . deal with them on an individual basis” (SME012, personal communication, August 8, 2022).

A consultant explained how years ago, he proposed a tracking system with disaggregated data for grades 9-12. He even “trained school personnel on how to identify and create a list of foster care students, interview them, and identify their needs for a plan to meet those needs” (SME019, personal communication, July 7, 2022). He left the district, and by the time he returned, whatever he had initiated was just pushed aside. No further action was taken. No sign of the initial work was found. The list was gone. However, he doubts that whatever individual record the school manages is accurate, as evidenced by his experience with a young mentee with performance issues. “Instead of addressing the issues, they put him in low-level classes where he could easily get Bs. When I asked for record, the information was not helpful” (SME019, July 5, 2022).

### ***Teachers are Kept out of the Loop over Privacy Concerns***

School districts in South Florida have consciously decided not to share information on students’ foster care status with teachers. An advocate for foster care students was told by school board members that the laws (specifically FERPA) “limit what school officials can know and disclose about a student” (SME015, personal communication, June 10, 2022). That notion is rejected by a legal expert who claimed, “FERPA has exceptions for kids in dependency care. Only delinquent kids have restrictions to records . . . there is no legal barrier to share information since the shelter documents include a consent form signed by parents to release educational records” (SME004, personal communication, July 14, 2022).

Once the child enters care, a REC form (Registration Emergency Contact Form) is indeed completed to notify the school of DCF involvement. However, case managers explained, “not much is disclosed, and there is no space to communicate needs. . . . Teachers have no idea what those kids are exposed to” (DCM020, Personal Communication, June 30, 2022). Students “are

flagged in the database upon notification of being sheltered. . . but administrators and counselors are usually the ones with access to the data” (SME012, personal communication, August 5, 2022). The district Liaison of one school district indicated that “school contacts inform teachers of students in their classroom involved with the Department of Children and Families” (SME001, personal communication, July 11, 2022). However, Caseworkers and advocates disputed that. A seven (7) years veteran case worker explained that “a lot of time the teachers do not know the child was just removed” (DCM039, personal communication, June 7, 2022). One Foster Care District Liaison put it bluntly, “teachers are not our direct customers. We provide information to the foster care designee and/or school social worker” (SME008, personal communication, June 9, 2022), and the reason is the fear of the child being treated differently or that it is “perceived as a HIPPA violation to disclose foster care status” (DCM020, June 30, 2022).

Even with the Staffing to decide the child's best interest related to a change in school, “Teachers rarely participate” (DCM013, June 13, 2022). The lack of access to that information is troubling to even case workers who are concerned that “the people that are hands-on with the children – teachers and paraprofessionals in the classrooms – unfortunately, cannot look at students screen . . . have no idea what those kids are exposed to” (DCM020, June 30, 2022). As a result of that, a child with an outburst that could be expressive of his/her removal the night before “can be baker acted or arrested easily because the teacher would not know what just happened to him/her the night before” (SME015, personal communication, June 10, 2022).

### ***No Intentional Provision for Missed Instructional Times***

Missed instructional time is a moot point. For many reasons, foster care students missed instructional times. As a veteran dependency case worker puts it, they have “constant disruptions

and school moves” (DCM001, personal communication, June 17, 2022). It is a fact that removing a child will cause disruption. Placement may take time. Once the placement is determined, ESSA staffing must occur within five days. Should transportation be identified as an issue, implementation takes ten business days. Sometimes foster care children would be backer acted or in juvenile detention; there is no consciousness of the instructional time lost during that transition. I was not able to question teachers on the issue, but dependency case workers always answer with an "I don't know" or refer to the fact that court hearings are virtual now and that the child will not have to leave school to go to court although this may soon change.

One even suggested that it was “impossible for case managers to monitor if school is aware of their absences due to case load” (DCM039, personal communication, June 7, 2022).

### **The Outliers: Stories of Successful Foster Care Alumni**

What was striking and even telling is how much foster care alumni remember about the circumstances and conditions of their initial removal. Two participants maintained that they do not remember much of what led them into care. Whereas FCA017 claimed to have “a fuzzy memory” of his childhood, although he remembers the day his mother signed her rights away. Much of what they remember is consistent with the narrative of how children are removed and placed into care.

Some were sheltered because of substance abuse. That was the story of Participant FCA001, who entered care at nine with her three siblings. She also claimed instances of neglect and physical and sexual abuse. They were initially placed in a foster home, then nonrelative care, ultimately separated, and were adopted by age 16. Participant FCA016 was raised by her grandmother as her mother dealt with substance abuse. When the grandmother could no longer

assume the responsibility, she moved with an uncle to another state and then back to Florida and was placed in a foster home.

Some dealt with issues of domestic violence. Participant FCA013 was parentified, kept in a locked apartment, and homeschooled without access to the outside world. She observed the abuse as early as three or four years old and called herself in by age 14. She was placed with a foster mother, a Jamaican minister with whom she still maintains contact. FCA017 was two years old when he was placed into care. He entered care with five siblings. After a while, he was reunited with the biological mother and reentered care as the mother kept going back to her abuser.

Some of them were recent immigrants who clashed with their parents and stepparents. FCA002 was living with her father and stepmother. The relationship deteriorated. She ran away and was subsequently apprehended in an abandoned house, detained, and placed into care. FCA004 was living with a sister after her father's and mother's passing. She went back and forth with siblings until she felt she could not do it any longer and called herself in to be placed with a Caucasian foster parent. The culture was different. That parent had much structure, which – at that time – did not bode well with her, and she ran away and then relocated to Melbourne.

There were instances of homelessness as well. Participant FCA014 lived with her mom and stepfather until the age of eight. Mom was unemployed. They were living in a car. Her stepfather had a seizure which led to a long-term coma. Eventually, the situation was reported to DCF, and she was removed.

At the onset, some of them were raised by their grandmother. Participant FCA015 lived with his grandmother until her health started to worsen. The children that were under her care were all then removed and placed into care.

From the pool of alumni selected for this study, it can be said that foster care students attend substandard schools even before entering care. Some of those students may meet the criteria for supportive services and educational plans but have not been evaluated and fall through the cracks despite evidence of the need for evaluation. A legal expert explained that "no net to catch students falling through the cracks" (SME004, July 14, 2022). However, she had anecdotal evidence that this was a challenge for the system.

***Childhood Experience and Learning: Disruption, high mobility, and poor-quality education***

The participants in this study entered care very early, from two years old to fourteen years old. They were separated from their siblings. And the reason for the removal fit the typical description of that general population: substance abuse, neglect, physical and sexual violence (including one that was kept in her apartment and unable to even open doors), homelessness, including two who moved from Haiti but were faced with strained relationships with their relatives and called the hotline as abandoned.

Prior to entering care, they lived traumatic experiences. Several of them were removed from their grandmothers, who could not continue caring for them due to deteriorating health conditions. One was "homeschooled" and had no contact with the outside world under the penalty of corporal punishment. She referred to herself as a "house daughter" responsible for domestic chores (cooking and cleaning) and assisting her dad with his business.

The disruption started very early for them. The trauma was such that they do not remember much about that time. Participant FCA001 explained, "I attended so many schools I don't even remember the names" (personal communication, June 6, 2022), and those schools tended to be in "very low-income areas where there was a lot of drama and fighting" (FCA015, personal communication, July 20, 2022). Participant FCA017 explained that for a long while, he

was “engulfed with life outside academics. My focus was not what was going on at school or in the classroom” (Participant FCA017, personal communication, July 26, 2022). Participant FCA001 explained she could not go to school often because of the constant moving or because her mom could not take her to school. One participant explained she was angry after her mother's untimely death. She became rebellious and was getting in much trouble.

### ***School as a Getaway***

A seasoned Guardian Ad Litem interviewed for this study stated that some foster care students “have used school as a substitute and do very well because it gives them someplace else to put their minds” (SME006, personal communication, June 15, 2022). Successful foster care alumni pointed to school as a positive thing they had some control over and used it as a getaway. Participant FCA001 stated that she “liked school because it was to get away from my home life . . . it was a safe haven . . . school offered me a sense of stability” (Personal communication, June 6, 2022). Participant FCA004 explained, “I wanted to stay in school . . . away from the house” (Personal communication, June 11, 2022). The participant who was kept home found school to be fun. Some saw it as a passion and the key to success. Others described it as “a comfortable environment, a place where I can go and get support” (Participant FCA017, personal communication, July 26, 2022).

The transition did not impact this group. Many were placed with very engaged foster parents or group homes with structured programming and a certain stability.

### ***The Challenges of Going to School While in Care***

1. Feeling different and embarrassed/ Family dynamic – Not wanting to be singled out, treated differently for fear of being exposed and messing up the only safe place.
2. Playing catch-up – Makeup work to ensure graduation requirements are met.

3. Infighting/Peer interaction/Social interaction/Social disconnect – argument over minor things with peers at the group home.
4. Trust issues.
5. Emotional intelligence.
6. Planning the future.
7. Distraction – Lived in turmoil that caused pain – Did not have a chance to be a child.

### ***Expected Support from the School***

We wanted to get a sense of the resources foster care alumni wish for while attending school to help them achieve and succeed. They were listed as follows:

1. Space to decompress/ Support group – Somewhere where feelings are validated, and students can regulate their emotions.
2. Support system in school/Guidance – Someone who understands my journey and can help me navigate and plan my future.
3. Tutoring.
4. Peer support - connection to students who are in the same situation.
5. Mentor – Someone who can help with big life decisions/ someone who looks like me that I can relate to and connect with.

### ***Tools for Success***

1. Focus on the positive no matter what.
2. Faith.
3. Stay busy: Get involved in extracurricular activities.
4. Used school as an escape and a positive outlet.
5. Knowing what I wanted.



***Critical Factors to Success***

1. Self-determination – an intentional decision to beat the odds/Want to be stable.
2. Driven and self-motivated.
3. Coaches celebrating small successes.
4. Understanding the value of education – people promote education and help understand how it leads to success.
5. Perseverance/Persistence/Resilience
6. A supportive network/unrelenting support
7. Faith/Constant prayer – leaving everything up to God.

***A Helpful Person***

1. My Godmother a constant presence who provided an emotional connection.
2. My mentor (iii - a family friend who guides and help, helps me to stay focus).
3. Teacher who made sure I stayed on task.
4. Coach (ii) never gave up on me, helped me deal with my emotions, and helped me identify resources.
5. Foster care home director/Foster Mom – emphasized the importance of education.

**Summary of Findings**

The findings are alarming and require a sense of urgency which is challenged by the sheer size of the foster care population.

1. A false sense of contentment and fatalism handicap actions towards ambitious goals of academic achievement.
  - a. No provision for adverse childhood experience.
  - b. Seed of instability at the onset.

- c. Lack of intentional synergy across the system to ensure academic success:  
Silos and fractured collaborative relationships.
  - d. Inadequate resources.
2. Educational stability mandate challenged by foster home shortage and transportation issues.
3. No comprehensive assessment and tracking of foster care students' performance.
4. Districts keep teachers out of the loop over privacy concerns.
5. No intentional provision for missed instructional times.
6. Successful foster care students see school as a getaway, are self-motivated, and have a constant presence to help them navigate the system in planning for the future.

### **Research Questions Results**

The study has been able to get some answers to the questions that guided this journey.

Based on my deductions of the findings:

1. What strategies could help schools identify the needs and barriers of foster children?
  - a. A trauma-informed school with a culture of care and the capacity to build resiliency, a strong sense of belonging, and excellence.
  - b. Lead the way to a community-based approach to repairing relational injuries.
  - c. Ongoing collaboration with trauma-informed experts to assess needs and implement appropriate strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma on learning.
  - d. Provide additional resources for equitable educational opportunities:
    - i. Safe space to decompress.
    - ii. Tutoring that considers actual deficits.

- iii. Effective coordination of services (synergy) to provide advocacy and guidance.
  - e. Commitment to monitor students' performance (individually and as a subgroup).
  - f. Establish working partnerships with community agencies.
  - g. Revisit FERPA for a better understanding of privacy concerns related to sharing education records with teachers.
2. What tools are needed to help foster children mitigate educational transitions and adverse childhood experiences to improve academic performance?
- a. Early and comprehensive assessment of every foster care student to determine the depth of deficits and needs.
  - b. A comprehensive plan of care that is discussed and communicated among stakeholders.

## **Chapter V - CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS**

### **Introduction**

This study seeks to understand the lived experience of foster care children in the K-12 school system in South Florida with the hope of proposing effective strategies and tools to improve academic outcomes amongst foster care children by creating a healthy school environment that considers the needs of that subgroup.

The California studies showed an “invisible achievement gap” with this “distinct subgroup” and an education crisis despite the state's ambitious goal of providing high-quality education to all. The failure to generate and monitor disaggregating data on the performance of foster care students as a subgroup was fatal. Their needs were unrecognized, unmet, and unstudied.

The vexing problem was consistent with the national trend of a highly mobile group within dysfunctional systems handicapped by a detrimental lack of communication and intentional synchronization of services. California showed us that the invisible achievement gap persists despite the federal mandate of educational stability, established as a joint responsibility of educational and child welfare agencies.

When schools were empowered to understand how detrimental the lack of data sharing was to the educational pursuit of the subgroup and funding matched the commitment of school leaders with staffing changes and additional resources to help foster care students overcome systemic barriers to success, fundamental changes were noticed.

In this era of accountability, schools must pay attention to underperforming subgroups and equip them with the tools needed to succeed. That is consistent with the school's calling to create competent citizens, independent and critical thinkers. *Brown v Board of Education* (1954)

has established a tradition of educational rights being made available on equal terms. That quality education could be seen as the civil rights question of our nation today. Then the question becomes how do we best equip our schools – particularly our public schools – to meet societal needs, understanding that those needs go far beyond academics?

### **Summary of Findings**

Consistent with the findings of the California studies (2013 & 2014), this researcher has found that the systems are dysfunctional in South Florida and that they are operating in silos with no sense of urgency related to the performance of foster care students. A deep sense of contentment and fatalism guides the provision of services.

Parental consent issues threatened the provision of services and bureaucracy constrained collaboration between systems. The collaborative relationship between systems and agencies is said to be fractured, with no synergy, more procedural than quality improvement, which leads to children falling through the cracks with no net designed to catch them. That creates a false sense of accomplishment. There are no clear metrics of success being monitored, and no accountability is established for the performance of foster care students. Moreover, coordination of services is left at the mercy of a strained dependency care system, which causes serious gaps to persist.

There is a clear sense of educational stability being a mandate. However, practitioners are confronted with inherent obstacles that threaten the mandate. The first challenge is a foster care home shortage often seen as unsurmountable and dictating decisions inconsistent with the mandate. Transportation is another challenge to the mandate as caregivers would use that often to force a change in school by threatening not to transport the child or respond to eventual emergencies.

There is no comprehensive report on the performance of foster care students in South Florida. Consequently, we do not have a clear sense of their challenges and the deficits that must be addressed. A flag system makes it easy to identify the students who are in care. However, performance information is individualized, and no formal report is generated to analyze the group's performance.

Teachers are left out of the loop over privacy concerns. There are disagreements between school leaders and advocates over the extent of information sharing that needs to take place. From the school leader's perspective, FERPA establishes constraints. It would be unlawful even to discuss the foster care status of a child with the teachers. Advocates and legal experts rebut that to claim there is an exception to FERPA for foster care children and that the parental consent to disclose educational records would also allow for the sharing of information.

When this study looks at successful foster care alumni as outliers, this researcher noticed they had less frequent moves while in care. They used the school as a getaway and were self-motivated. However, they also had someone who handheld them in planning for postsecondary education. A constant presence turns out to be a great asset to their success.

## **Conclusion**

Florida is facing a latent education crisis as it relates to foster care students unless the schools take the initiative to lead the way to implement new strategies and adopt new tools to help improve academic performance within that subgroup.

Schools must develop a consistent plan addressing adverse educational outcomes. It is indeed about responsibility and accountability. More and more, and since the enactment of Every Student Succeed Act, the burden of academic achievement has been placed on the schools. Therefore, schools would be well advised to collect and monitor data to help meet the goal of

high-quality education for all. From the literature review, this study has found that schools can play a critical role because of their potential to serve as "safe and stable environments" in their lives. Much can be done to enhance resilience and support children's competency and self-efficacy by promoting a strong sense of belonging, emphasizing core values, and creating a sense of order and discipline.

The literature review also supports the need for systemic change to repair relational injuries with a positive school environment that is welcoming, supportive, and responsive to needs as they emerge.

There is a point I want to address here for purpose of clarification. Many educational leaders and even practitioners have raised concerns over privacy to explain the lack of communication between agencies related to the performance of foster care students. The U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in their 2016 non-regulatory guidance addressed that by informing that the Uninterrupted Scholars Act was enacted in 2013 to amend FERPA and "permit educational agencies and institutions to disclose, without parental consent or the consent of an eligible student, education records of students in foster care" (p.4).

From the Common School movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to ESSA, there has been this constant commitment to equal opportunity by providing comprehensive educational opportunities as a right to all. In *Brown v Board of education*, said right was made available to all on equal terms. The overarching question is then: How do we ensure a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain high-quality education for foster care students?

There is an old debate about the purpose of public school going beyond mere academics and that educational attainment is a crucial factor impacting self-sufficiency. There is a need to

have systemic change with a paradigm shift related to the purpose and function of the school in meeting the challenge of creating a healthy school ecosystem that is fair, appropriately resourced, and highly accountable. As discussed in chapter I, the challenge with foster care students is that they were woefully unprepared for independent adult life and underperformed in school. The strategies and tools must be consistent with the challenge and need a school-based approach to this conundrum.

Within the context of transformational, collective, and distributive leadership, this requires the right balance between instructional and organizational leadership to build capacity for a holistic approach to reducing the negative educational consequences of this subgroup. Again, this is contingent upon a paradigm shift. It is not enough to have change the dynamic in the classroom. This must be a commitment of the district to allocate needed resources and make the performance of foster care students a priority.

***Effective Strategies.***

1. A trauma-informed school with a culture of care and the capacity to build resiliency, a strong sense of belonging, and excellence.
2. Lead the way to a community-based approach to repairing relational injuries.
3. Ongoing collaboration with trauma-informed experts to assess needs and implement appropriate strategies to mitigate the impact of trauma on learning.
4. Provide additional resources for equitable educational opportunities:
  - a. Safe space to decompress
  - b. Tutoring that considers actual deficits
  - c. Effective coordination of services (synergy) to provide advocacy and guidance
5. Commitment to monitor students' performance (individually and as a subgroup).



6. Establish working partnerships with community agencies.
7. Revisit FERPA to better understand privacy concerns related to sharing education records with teachers.

***Effective tools.***

1. Early and continuous assessment of needs.
2. A comprehensive individualized plan of care.
3. Appropriate staffing.
4. Open communication amongst stakeholders.

**Implications of the Study**

The research could be a wake-up call for practitioners and scholars to shift their focus to the performance of foster care students in the state for further studies and planning to provide for their academic achievement. The current modus operandi challenges the mandate of educational stability but also denies foster care the promise of equal opportunity to quality education.

The ecological theory submits that human development requires a multiperson system of interaction not limited to a single setting. A child's healthy development is contingent upon synchronization of the various systems of care. From that ecological perspective, schools can play a critical role in facilitating capacity building for educational change to ensure inclusion, equity, and social justice.

This study has been very good at bringing the perspective of the case workers, the subject matter experts, and former students to the table via in-depth interviews. Talking to the case workers dealing with the issues daily and the foster care alumni who succeed against all odds was essential. However, the perspective of the teachers is also critical. We could not assess the

teacher's level of awareness and self-efficacy to understand better the school environment in which those students are expected to pursue their educational goals.

It is also essential to recruit more participants to understand the climate better. This study only had 12 subject matter experts, 13 dependency case workers, and eight foster care, alumni. We can extend the life of the research to get more information.

### ***Theoretical Implications***

Schools must be intentional about keeping track of foster care students and assume leadership in establishing a learning community for shared responsibility and purpose for improved performance, ongoing assessment, and professional development. The approach needs to be more holistic.

### ***Practical Implications***

The Foster care designee position should be fully funded with a clear definition of duties and responsibilities. It should be empowered to coordinate services, ensure assessments are taken place and develop a comprehensive cognitive, social-emotional, and postsecondary planning plan.

### ***Future Implications***

Ongoing research is needed to monitor the performance of this at-risk subgroup.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This is a study of the lived experiences of foster care children. It did not seek to assess specific policy initiatives that may or may not help with the challenge. In recent years, various legislations have been implemented to help support the education of foster care students. From the enactment of the Foster Care Independent Act of 1999 to Fostering Connection to ESSA, several legislative initiatives have attempted to create a healthy environment for students in care

to thrive. The challenge has always been the leadership needed at the local level to challenge the status quo and make inroads in promoting educational attainment among foster care children.

This study does not attempt to assess those legislative initiatives.

This study does not assess their experience during postsecondary education, even though one of our selection criteria for successful alumni was the completion of a bachelor's degree. However, it is also limited to the experience in the K-12 school system in South Florida. The study did not concern itself with the suitability of college pursuit as an educational goal or whether a vocational program would be more appropriate for foster care students.

The study does not have the perspective of classroom teachers or parents, who are described as demanding but have no voice in this narrative.

The study also did not assess teachers' level of preparedness or self-efficacy.

### **Recommendations**

The quest is to understand how schools can better prepare foster care students to become contributing citizens. This study is a step in the right direction to understand the journey and make appropriate recommendations. Given that the list of teachers is still being generated, I recommend that this researcher continues with the study to incorporate the teachers' perspectives and seek the input of current parents and even students for a better understanding of the challenge. And since awareness of the challenge need to be raised, this researcher could publish the findings of the extended study in a book format within the next year.

### **Summary of the Chapter**

The chapter discusses the study findings as a wake-up call for practitioners, advocates, and scholars to monitor the performance of this distinct subgroup. The provision of equal educational opportunity should be consistent with the distinct challenges foster care students face

as individuals and as a subgroup. This researcher recommends an extension of this study to include the perspectives of teachers, foster parents, and school designees for a more comprehensive assessment of the needs of foster care students. It also argues the need to track and monitor the performance of this subgroup consistently.

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## Appendices

## Appendix A – Letter to FDOE requesting teacher listing

Dear Mr. John Doe

I would like your help in generating a list of k-12 teachers to survey the experience of foster kids through the k-12 public school system in South Florida.

I am currently attending Lynn University and working on my doctoral research study on closing the achievement gap among foster care students. The study involves interviews with foster care youth alumni, Dependency Case Managers, and School district leaders, as well as survey of teachers.

The survey seeks to determine current challenges teachers face in the classroom related to foster care children's learning experience and the level of coordination with the dependency care system.

The purpose of the study is to get an understanding of effective strategies that could help mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences and school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students, thereby reducing the achievement gap.

The information gathered from this study may assist districts in developing effective programs that contribute to positive foster student outcomes. It will help create a healthy school ecosystem for a more equitable educational opportunity.

Participation is voluntary. Participants may withdraw consent at any given time without affecting their relationship and employment status.

I would appreciate your assistance in generating a sample of teachers for this survey.

Thank you,

Ralph Cheriza, MSL, Doctoral Candidate  
Lynn University  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)

Dr. Nancy Kline, Dissertation Committee Chair  
Lynn University  
[Nkline@lynn.edu](mailto:Nkline@lynn.edu)

Appendix B – Email to social service agencies to help recruit foster care alumni and Dependency  
Case Managers

Dear Mr. John Doe

I would like your help in identifying participants in a study of the experience of foster care students in the k-12 public school system in South Florida.

I am currently attending Lynn University and working on my doctoral research study on closing the achievement gap among foster children. The study involves interviews with foster care youth alumni, Dependency Case Managers, and School district leaders, as well as surveys of teachers.

The purpose of the study is to get an understanding of effective strategies that could help mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences and school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students, thereby reducing the achievement gap.

The information gathered from this study may assist districts in developing effective programs that contribute to positive foster student outcomes. It will help create a healthy school ecosystem for a more equitable educational opportunity.

Participation is voluntary. Participants may withdraw consent at any given time without affecting their relationship and employment status. Results will be anonymous and identifying information will be kept confidential and de-identified.

Because of your agency's work with foster care children, we were hoping you could help us identify successful foster care alumni who went through public school in South Florida and have completed a bachelor's degree, maintained gainful employment, and are currently living independently. We also would like to interview Dependency Case Managers with 5 to 10 years of experience.

In the hope you will be able to assist, we thank you.

Ralph Cheriza, MSL, Doctoral Candidate  
Lynn University  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)

Dr. Nancy Kline, Dissertation Committee Chair  
Lynn University  
[Nkline@lynn.edu](mailto:Nkline@lynn.edu)

Appendix C – Facebook and LinkedIn flyer to recruit foster youth alumni

**Volunteers needed for Dissertation study.**

**We are looking for successful foster alumni  
To help close the achievement gap among foster children to ensure educational attainment.**

You may qualify if you

- 18 years or older
- Attended K-12 in South Florida while in foster care
- Hold a bachelor's degree or higher
- Gainfully employed

Please contact:

Ralph Cheriza, MSL

  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)

Participation involves:

- In-depth interview (in person or via Zoom) on your experience in the k-12 school system
- Reflective sessions on what help you overcome your challenges and succeed

## Appendix D – Letter to School Districts (Dade, Broward, and Palm Beach)

Dear John Doe,

I would like your help in identifying participants in a study of the experience of foster care students in the k-12 public school system in South Florida.

I am currently attending Lynn University and working on my doctoral research study on closing the achievement gap among foster children. The study involves interviews with foster care youth alumni, Dependency Case Managers, and School district leaders, as well as surveys of teachers.

The study aims to understand effective strategies that could help mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences and school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students and, thereby, reduce the achievement gap.

The information gathered from this study may assist districts in developing effective programs that contribute to positive foster student outcomes. It will help create a healthy school ecosystem for a more equitable educational opportunity.

Participation is voluntary. Participants may withdraw consent at any given time without affecting their relationship and employment status. Results will be anonymous and identifying information will be kept confidential and de-identified.

Your district has been proactive in creating a position to coordinate services to foster care students. We would like to interview that person or the chief academic officer, or anyone else from the district who would be able to discuss services and policy initiatives related to foster care students.

In the hope you will be able to assist, we thank you.

Ralph Cheriza, MSL, Doctoral Candidate  
Lynn University  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)

Dr. Nancy Kline, Dissertation Committee Chair  
Lynn University  
[Nkline@lynn.edu](mailto:Nkline@lynn.edu)

Appendix E – Letter to participants (Foster youth alumni, Dependency Case Managers, School district leaders)

Dear Mr. John Doe

You have been suggested as a potential participant in a study of the experience of foster students in the K-12 school system in South Florida as part of the requirement to complete my doctoral degree at Lynn University.

The study aims to understand effective strategies that could help mitigate adverse consequences of traumatic experiences and school instability to ensure equitable educational opportunities to foster students and, thereby, reduce the achievement gap.

The information gathered from this study may assist districts in developing effective programs that contribute to positive foster student outcomes. It will help create a healthy school ecosystem for a more equitable educational opportunity.

Be advised that you are free to participate or not to participate. You are also free to withdraw your consent at any given time without affecting your relationship with the researcher and/or the study. Participating in this survey will incur no risk. Choosing not to participate will not affect your employment.

The one-on-one interview will take place at your convenience on zoom and will be recorded for accuracy. Your answers will remain anonymous, and your information will be kept confidential.

The researcher will not disclose your identity as a participant; however, your role in the school district will be used as part of the research study.

Please sign the attached consent form to proceed.

Thank you for your participation,

Ralph Cheriza, MSL, Doctoral Candidate  
Lynn University  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)

Dr. Nancy Kline, Dissertation Committee Chair  
Lynn University  
[Nkline@lynn.edu](mailto:Nkline@lynn.edu)



## Appendix F – Informed Consent form

## INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

The following information is provided to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting the relationship with the researcher or study.

This study aims to understand the lived experiences of foster care children in the k-12 educational system in South Florida. The interview will provide information on school climate, classroom experience, and teacher/foster student interaction quality and how they affect this population's learning experience. The information gathered from this survey may assist in developing a healthy school ecosystem that ensures educational stability and equal opportunity to foster care children.

Choosing not to participate will not affect your employment.

The sharing of daily experiences or stories may trigger responses that are in keeping with your daily exposure while on the job. You may decline to answer any or all questions and terminate your involvement at any time if you so choose. There will be no direct benefits from participating in this study. The hope is that the information you share with us will help create a better environment for foster students to pursue academic achievement.

Do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before, during, or after participating in the interview. I will happily share my findings with you after the research is completed. The researcher will know your identity as a participant; however, your name will not be associated with the research findings.

Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the study. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Thank you for your participation,

Ralph Cheriza, MSL  
Ed. D candidate  
Lynn University  
[rcheriza@email.lynn.edu](mailto:rcheriza@email.lynn.edu)



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I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G – Interview with foster care alumni

1. How would you describe your childhood experience and your journey through the dependency care system?
2. How has that experience impacted your learning?
3. Describe your experience with the k-12 public school system
4. Explain the challenges you faced during your school years.
5. What was your experience with transitions and school instability?
6. What are some of the resources you feel would have facilitated your learning experience?
7. What were some of the tools that help keep you engaged, self-regulated, and motivated?
8. What were some of the key factors to your success?
9. Can you identify someone who has been helpful to your educational success and why?
10. Tell me something I have not asked you, and you feel relevant to understanding the plight of foster children in the k-12 public school system.

## Appendix H – Interview with District administrators/Leaders

1. What are the legislative mandates you receive from the federal and state government related to the education of foster care students?
2. What resources are available in your district to ensure a fair, equal, and significant opportunity for a high-quality education to foster students?
3. Is there a tracking system in place with disaggregated data on the performance of foster children in your district?
4. How do you coordinate with the dependency care system to meet the needs of foster care children?
5. What is the process in place to accommodate transition and ensure academic continuity?
6. What are the district's major challenges related to foster care children's education?
7. How do you equip teachers to identify, assist, and track foster care students?
8. Does the district have a mechanism to equip teachers to consider foster care students' traumatic experiences and social-emotional well-being?
9. Are the teachers being trained on trauma-informed teaching practices?
10. Anything I have not asked that can help understand the climate at the district related to foster care students?

## Appendix I – Interview with Dependency Case Workers

1. Please describe your experience with foster care students relating to the k-12 school system in south Florida.
2. What are the major challenges for foster children attending the k-12 school system in South Florida?
3. What is your mandate related to the education of foster care students?
4. What was your experience in facilitating transitions and placement of foster care students?
5. What has been your experience with the transfer of school records during transitions?
6. Do you know of resources available at the school district to facilitate learning for foster care students?
7. Do you feel there is intentional synchronization of services between the dependency care system and educational agencies to help foster children overcome barriers?
8. Explain the placement process of a foster child and the subsequent school transition
9. What happened with the missed instructional times caused by those transitions and interruptions due to court appointments?
10. Is there anything you feel I need to know about foster care students that I did not ask about?

## Appendix J – Survey questions for teachers and guidance counselors

The following information is provided to help you decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You should be aware that you are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without affecting the relationship with the researcher or study.

This study aims to understand the lived experiences of foster children in the k-12 educational system in South Florida. The survey will provide information on school climate, classroom experience, and teacher/foster student interaction quality and how they affect this population's learning experience. The information gathered from this survey may assist in developing a healthy school ecosystem that ensures educational stability and equal opportunity to foster children.

Choosing not to participate will not affect your employment. This study has no benefits; however, you may enjoy sharing your lived experiences with foster children.

Do not hesitate to ask questions about the study before, during, or after participating in the survey. I will happily share my findings with you after the research is completed. The researcher will know your identity as a participant; however, your name will not be associated with the research findings.

1. Do you agree to participate?
  - Yes
  - No
2. My school has a system to identify and monitor the performance of foster care students.
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
3. At my school, the teacher with a foster child in his/her class roster is given sufficient information to assess that student's need.
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
4. My school has a strong culture of engaging and welcoming foster children
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
5. When a foster child in my classroom has court hearings, I am notified in advance and given an opportunity to help the student catch up on missing instruction time.
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree

6. I have an effective working relationship with the dependency care system, the court, and other school personnel regarding foster children in my classroom (Synergy of intervention, background information shared, an update on transition planning)
  - Strongly Agree
  - Agree
  - Neither agree nor disagree
  - Disagree
  - Strongly disagree
7. Name the challenges you think foster children face in their educational pursuits.
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. I do not know
  - g. Not applicable
8. What are your challenges in teaching foster children?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_
  - d. \_\_\_\_\_
  - e. \_\_\_\_\_
  - f. I do not know
  - g. Not applicable
9. Does the IEP provide sufficient information to understand and assist foster children?
  - Yes
  - No
10. Does the 504 plan provide sufficient information to understand and assist foster children?
  - Yes
  - No
11. When a foster child is transferred to your classroom, do you receive sufficient information to understand their past academic challenges?
  - Yes
  - No
12. Have you ever had training on trauma-informed teaching practices?
  - Yes
  - No
13. Do you understand how complex trauma affects foster care children in their educational pursuits?
  - Yes
  - No