2016

Educational Experiences of Foster Children and Communication Patterns of Key Stakeholders: The Foster Parent Perspective

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Digital Object Identifier: http://dx.doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2016.107

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Recommended Citation

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FOSTER CHILDREN AND COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF KEY
STAKEHOLDERS: THE FOSTER PARENT PERSPECTIVE

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Science in the
College of Agriculture, Food and Environment
at the University of Kentucky

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AND COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF
KEY STAKEHOLDERS: THE FOSTER PARENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER CHILDREN
AND COMMUNICATION PATTERNS OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS: THE FOSTER
PARENT PERSPECTIVE

This research explored the perspective of foster parents on the educational experiences of foster children and experiences of communication patterns with other key stakeholders (social workers, and teachers). Factors focused on were educational experience of foster children, communication patterns, the impact of communication patterns on the educational experience, and barriers to effective communication. Five individuals who were, at the time of the study, foster parents to at least one child were interviewed. Participants openly shared a variety of positive and negative experiences. This study adopted the theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's cultural-ecological theory. Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim and inductive coding was used for analysis of transcriptions. Central themes that emerged included past experiences of foster child impacts the educational experience, the teacher-student relationship impacts the educational experience, and communication patterns impact the consistency of expectations across systems. Results from the study showed that foster parents are generally satisfied with the communication patterns they experience with key stakeholders. Consistency of expectations and modeling of help seeking behavior were identified as the key impacts communication patterns have on the educational experience of foster children. A unique experience of the impact of communication with biological parents of the foster child was also revealed.

KEYWORDS: Foster Parents, Foster Children, Social Workers, Communication Patterns, Educational Experience

Teresa R Hardin

March 2, 2016

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Chapter 1

Introduction

There are many welfare institutions developed to manage and protect the safety of children. Foster care is one in which children who are at risk of harm in the form of abuse or neglect are placed in out-of-home care (McWay, Pazdera, Vennum, & Wojciak, 2013). Children can enter into the foster care system in a number of ways (Harden, 2001). One way is through group home settings. These settings involve group housing of children of similar age range. Another way children enter the foster system is kinship care. Kinship care involves the placing of children into biological relatives' homes for fostering. Thirdly, children enter into the foster care system through agency appointed non relative foster homes. Individuals who have been evaluated and enlisted by a foster care agency become foster parents and create homes for individual children as wells as sibling groups (McKellar, 2004).

In the U.S. there were up to 662,000 children placed in out of home care in 2010, of those 408,000 children were in licensed foster family homes and non-family group homes (Pecora, 2012). These numbers have been rising and falling over the past five years. In the state of Kentucky, there are currently (as of August 2015) 7,772 children in out of home care with active placements, 41.8% of those children are placed in foster homes, 12.6% in residential placements, and 3.4% are in a relative's home (Kentucky For Health And Family Services, 2015). The age ranges of the children in Kentucky placed in foster care are within an even spread when considering the age of first entry into foster care. Of the total population 19.5% were less than one year at the time of entry, 15% were age one year to three years, 17.7% were ages three years to six years (Kentucky For

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Health And Family Services, 2015). Children ages six to 12 years at time of entry constitute 23.5% and ages 12 to 18 years hold 24.2% of the children in the foster care population in Kentucky (Kentucky For Health And Family Services, 2015). The average age of the total population in out of home care is 9.8 years and they have spent on average 30.3% of their life in foster care (Kentucky For Health And Family Services, 2015).

When a child experiences the lack of efficient care that warrants their placement in foster care, they are at risk of many lasting effects that range from neurobiological, cognitive, academic, and psychosocial difficulties (Libscomb & Pears, 2011). The academic difficulties of foster care children can create some further risks for foster care children transitioning into adulthood. Some of these include high school drop-out, low socioeconomic status, and lower rate of higher education, unemployment, and homelessness (Harden, 2001). Children in foster care come from environments that make them vulnerable to detrimental outcomes because of their exposure to maltreatment and family instability. They may have been exposed to violence within the family, as witnesses and victims, as well as substance abuse of parents, mental illness, and developmental disabilities (McKellar, 2004).

Academically, children within the foster care system are often one grade level behind their peer group, and have higher records of absence and tardiness (Simkiss, Stallard, & Thurgood, 2012). There is also a trend of incomplete school records; missing transcripts and immunization records (Pecora, 2012). These circumstances can delay enrollment and affect accurate placement. Foster care youth are at risk of losing credits when they move even a few weeks before the end of the school semester and in turn they

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are at risk of failing, dropping out, and not completing the GED. In a national sample study of adults who had been in foster care, 68% remember being placed in three or more elementary schools and more than 66% had been moved to five or more different schools in their time in foster care (Noonan, et al., 2012). Frequent changes of schools can affect a child in many ways including, socially, academically, behaviorally, and in many cases a stigma is placed on them as soon as they walk in the door.

In the classroom, children in foster care are found to have more behavioral issues than their peers, as well as a tendency to be easily victimized and experience aggressive behavior from peers (McKellar, 2004). The aggressive behavior from peers can be perceived by the foster child in different ways. Some children view the way they are being treated in school as a parallel to how they were mistreated by their biological parents. Children can develop a reinforced ideology of being a bad kid and deserving maltreatment (McKellar, 2004). Other children can exhibit a testing of limits of authority figures. They may go as far as having angry outbreaks when asked to do simple tasks, or ignore and avoid contact with authority (McKellar, 2004). Teachers of foster children report poor attention and unsuccessful work and study habits. Within special education there is a disproportionate number of foster children with learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional difficulties (McKellar, 2004).

There are numerous unmet needs for services of children in foster care. The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being found that 65% of five and six year olds involved in the child welfare system that presented extreme problems emotionally and behaviorally, did not receive mental health service of any kind. Also 63% of those children were identified as needing a referral for special education services and did not

have an Individual Education Plan (Libscomb & Pears, 2011). The demographics and academic risk factors of children in foster care create a need for research in successful practices and programs surrounding the care and education of these children. It is the goal of this study to impact the knowledge and practices of creating educational environments suited for children in foster care to succeed.

Expanding the scope of consideration, there are influences on a foster child's educational success in the form of key stakeholders assigned to work with the child in daily life (Harden, 2001). These stakeholders have been selected, within a system the foster child is involved in, to play developmental roles in the foster child's life. One key stakeholder involved, is the foster agency workers assigned to manage the foster child's case after entry into child welfare services. Foster agency workers provide foster children with different services that seek to improve the circumstances of the child's life (Spielfogel, Leather, Christian, & McMeel, 2011). Services such as foster-home placement, behavioral evaluation and assessment, and referrals to therapeutic services are developed by foster agency workers to create opportunities of development and improvement (McLean, 2011). When making decisions for the foster child, such as home-placement, they must interact with other systems the child is involved in.

Key stakeholders that foster agency workers interact with are foster parents. Foster parents have been selected to play a parental role to children involved in the foster care system (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). When a home placement is made, foster parents begin introducing the foster child into their home environment. Often foster parents have other biological or foster children already within the environment (Lewis, 2011). A smooth transition into home placement can influence the foster child in positive ways

(Brown, 2015). These stakeholders interact often to collaborate on many decisions involved in the foster child's life.

Furthermore, the educational development of foster children is a consideration for foster agency workers and foster parents (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). Home-placement also involves the enrolling of the foster child into educational systems. The third stakeholder involved in this system is the teacher. Teachers of foster children create opportunities for educational development. There is often interaction with the other stakeholders when the foster child has been placed in a home within the school district of the teacher's school (Jacobs, 2013). Collaboration of the foster agency workers, foster parents, and teachers takes place in many forms to create another smooth transition into an educational setting (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). This collaboration, along with others involved in being a key stakeholder in the life of a foster child, is essential to providing the foster child with ample opportunities of progression and development (Lewis, 2011). When the aforementioned factors in the lives of foster children are considered, the importance of collaboration among stakeholders is evident. Characteristics of successful collaboration will be the focus of inquiry in the present study.

Present Study

The present study is unique in nature as it seeks to involve the perspectives of the primary caregivers of children in foster care, specifically the foster parent. The stakeholder that tends to spend the most time with the child after placement is the foster parent. There is a unique relationship that develops between foster children and their foster parents (Lewis, 2011). The foster parent becomes the direct caregiver of the child and is involved in collaboration with all of the environments that surround the foster

child. Due to the intimate connection with the foster child's life, there is a focus on the foster parents' perspective on the adults who are surrounding the child in daily life at the foster care agency and school.

There is a necessity for collaboration in the lives of children in foster care with challenging behavior and risk factors (Brown, 2015). This is due to the multiple systems that are involved in the care and education of these children. Although this is true, the dynamics of communication and collaboration has been minimally researched and explored from the foster parent perspective (McLean, 2011). Accordingly, the present study explored the experiences of foster parents with other key stakeholders that are routinely enlisted and required to work together in support of children in foster care. Definitions of the terms in the present study can be found in entirety in Appendix A.

Research Questions

To develop a structure of study and reach the intended depth, the present study answered the following research questions from the perspective of the foster parent.

1. What are the communication patterns of adults involved in the education and care of foster children? This will be measured by characteristics of communication such as; method (in-person, phone, email etc.), frequency, clarity, content and perceived connotation.

2. What is the impact of collaboration of foster care agency workers (i.e. social workers, case managers), foster parents, and teachers of children in foster care on the foster child's educational experience? Educational experience will be measured by the perceptions of foster parents on the foster child's experience

in school setting, behavioral characteristics, peer relationships and performance on school tasks.

3. From the foster parent perspective, what are the barriers involved with successful communication among foster care agency workers, foster parents, and teachers of children in foster care?

Research Purpose

Although there are many areas of need and concern for the population of children in foster care, the current study focused exclusively, from the lens of the foster parent, on the impact of collaboration of primary caregiver groups on the educational experience of foster children. "Education has been found to be crucially important to the quality of adult life for individuals who have spent part of their childhood in foster care" (McKellar, 2004, p. 29). There are many paths to opportunities and lifestyles that can be altered and determined by educational attainment and experience for all adults, especially for foster care alumni. "Considering both the levels of education attainment and quality of educational achievement, foster adolescents are at risk of being left behind and ill-prepared for adult self-sufficiency" (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012, p. 539). Education has been noted as one of the most important aspects in assessing developmental outcomes of foster youth (Zlotnick et. al, 2012 & Pecora, 2012). With developed and informed educational practices, children can begin to overcome and surpass the risk factors involved with entering and remaining in foster care.

There is a need for special attention from practitioners and primary caregiver groups to academic achievement while in care. This is due to the overwhelming consequence of obtaining age-appropriate education as a prerequisite of successful

adolescent development. Literature notes that education achievement while in foster care predicts later employment and success in higher education (McLean, 2011 & Noonan et. al, 2012). This study seeks to contribute to the knowledge of successful practices of supporting the development of children in foster care into prepared and educated adults. There are many lives involved in the foster care system and researching to create successful programs and practices is crucial.

Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory

The elements of this study call for theoretical knowledge of the development of children and the impact of their surrounding environments. There is also a call for the involvement of systemic relationships between the children and the overlapping environments they experience each day. Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Theory is the perspective that considers these relationships and proposes that children are involved in overlapping environments that create a simultaneous influence on them. Being a cultural-ecological structured theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) Ecological Theory suggests the existence of direct and indirect influence being exerted from environments like school, home, cultural environments, and community. These influences define the challenges to which families and children need to adapt.

Considering the structure of this study, the systemic relationship between foster children and influences involved in their surrounding environments is a key focus. Environments such as school (teachers of foster children), home (foster parents), and community (foster agency employees), are all of significant direct and indirect influence. The cultural aspect of the foster care children's experience and surrounding environments will also be considered in the application of the cultural-ecological perspective. In 1979

Bronfenbrenner explained the links and developmental outcomes throughout the life course (Harris, Jackson, O'Brien, & Pecora, 2009). The exposure of children to these diverse environmental contexts explains the risk factors and trends in development of foster children on sociological, psychological, and educational dimensions.

The structure of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory involves labeling of systems surrounding and influencing children as they develop. The most direct interactional system for the child is labeled the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The microsystem involves influence on the child from environments like school and home. The child interacts with these systems in direct ways. For this study, the microsystem surrounding foster children will be considered in the form of the teachers of foster children as they are within the school, and foster parents as they are within the home. Foster agency workers are also involved in the microsystem of foster children due to the direct contact they have with them on multiple occasions (Haeley & Fisher, 2011).

Secondly, the influence of the interaction among microsystems in a child's life is labeled by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory as the mesosystem. When the microsystems connect and create relationships there is a different dynamic added to the influence of the systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem of the foster child will be considered in the present study as the communication and collaboration among all stakeholders. For example if a teacher of a foster child and the child's foster parent have a parent-teacher conference the two microsystems have created a mesosystem. This can also be said for meetings or communications among agency workers, teachers and parents in a triad dynamic.

Furthermore, Bronfenbrenner (1979) also considers the distant social systems that influence the child in indirect ways. The exosystem involves social structures, such as parent work place and community family resources (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Their influence on the development of a child occurs through interaction with the microsystems of the child. In this study, the exosystem is considered in the form of the foster care system. For the foster child, the foster care system interacts with the microsystems through policy and roles of agency workers and foster parents.

Finally, Bronfenbrenner (1979) acknowledges the influence of cultural beliefs and systems on development. The cultural influence is labeled the macrosystem within the theory. Cultural beliefs and systems can influence the development of a child in positive or negative ways. For example, a positive influence of culture is a sense of connection and identity within a community. A negative influence of culture can be stereotypes placed upon someone based on cultural identity. The aforementioned cultural demographics of children in foster care will be the macrosystem involved in the present study. Following, you will find a model of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory (Figure 1), as well as a model of theory connections to the present study (Figure 2).

Child

Microsystems-
Home, School

Mesosystem-
Interactions of
microsystems

Exosystem- Social
systems

Macrosystem-
Cultural beliefs
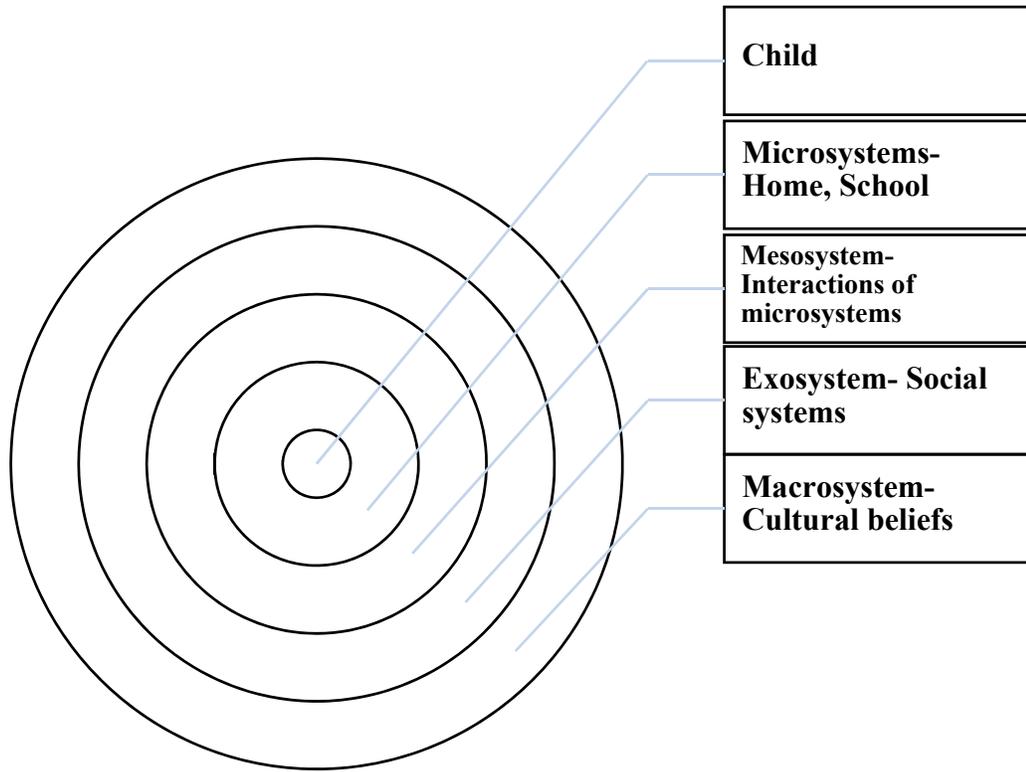
Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Theory Model.

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┌─────────────────────┐
│    Foster Child     │
├─────────────────────┤
│ Microsystem- Foster │
│ parents, Teachers,  │
│ Agency workers      │
├─────────────────────┤
│ Mesosystem-         │
│ Interaction among   │
│ stakeholders        │
├─────────────────────┤
│ Exosystem- Foster   │
│ Care System         │
├─────────────────────┤
│ Macrosystem-        │
│ Cultural beliefs of │
│ children in foster  │
└─────────────────────┘
```
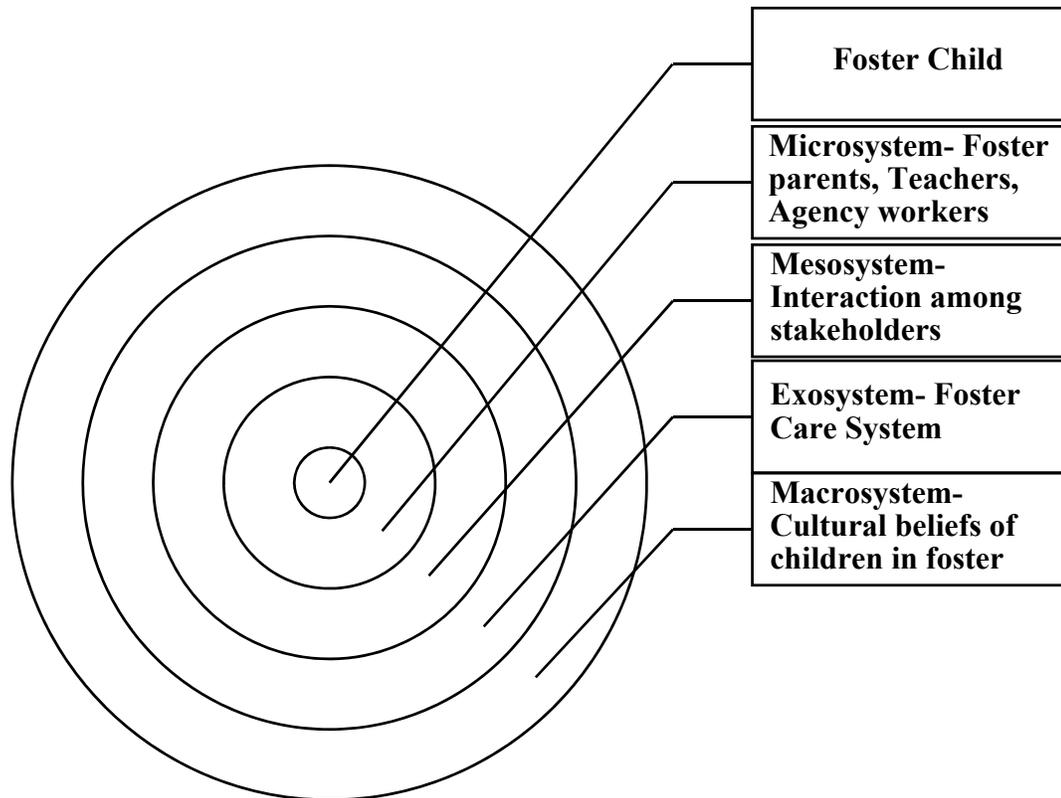
Figure 2: Theory connection to present study.

Development of Children in Foster Care

There has been a long lasting concern of the adolescent development of youth in

foster care (Harden, 2001). Harden (2001) acknowledges the importance of research and

consideration of the development of foster children due to the classification of the foster

care system as an institution involved in the progression and development of the children

enlisted. "Research on child and adolescence development of foster children is especially

important because the public argues that the foster care system as an institution should

not further disadvantage the child by having him/her fall farther behind" (Harden, 2001,

p.35). Due to this intention of the foster care institution, we need to research more about

the developmental status of children upon entering and exiting. A childhood history of

foster care is multi-dimensional and involves several factors and events that take place before placement and while in foster care (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). The impact of experiencing the foster care system and simultaneously the education system is highlighted in the present study due to the educational developmental trends of children in the foster care system as well as projected delays into adulthood. These will be revealed in the literature review to follow.

It is also documented that the experience of separation from their birth parents, neglect, abuse, and long stays in foster care by children in out of home placement can create a negative influence on the age appropriate tasks associated with adolescence (Shin, 2004). The consideration of child development of children in foster care also stems from the multiple threats to healthy development, poor physical health, attachment disorders, inadequate social skills and mental health difficulties on children in foster care (Haeley & Fisher, 2011). The impact of those experiences and communication patterns of surrounding systems and institutions on the educational tasks of adolescence in foster care was heavily considered. Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposes that the "only setting that serves as a comprehensive context for human development from the early year onward is the children's institution" (p.241). There is also an explicit acknowledgement of the "opportunity to investigate the impact of a contrasting primary setting on the course of development through childhood, adolescence, and sometimes beyond, into the middle years and old age" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p.275).

Thus, the purpose of this study is to use this theoretical framework to study the foster parent's perspective on the educational experience of foster children, and the communication patterns of key stakeholders.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

There are demographics of at risk children involving the risk or threat of negative influences in one's life (Orme & Buchler, 2001). Children in the foster care system come from low-income families, ethnic and racial minorities at disproportional rates compared with other children (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). It is also noted that children in foster care have higher rates of physical, psychological, and social problems, with the trend of having little support when they reach 18, the "age out" phase (Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). These demographics create a need for progression in the programming of foster care agencies, schools, and foster homes when trying to establish an impact on the development of children in the foster care system.

Culturally, while there has been a decline in the overall numbers of children placed in foster care, there has been a sustaining disproportionality of children of color (Harris et al., 2009). African American children continue to hold the greatest proportion of children of color placed apart from their birth families, and have doubled the percentage of the entire U.S. population, 15%, with a 32% representation of the foster care population (Harris et al., 2009).

Educational Experience

The educational experience of children in foster care is being impacted by the communication patterns of the systems surrounding them (Noonan, et al., 2012). A national study on foster care found that only 54% of young alumni of the foster care system has completed high school (Harris et al., 2009). It has also been concluded by a study of the Washington State foster care system that 38% of the youth leaving foster

care at age 18 or older had a high school diploma or GED, and 28% had dropped out (Harris et al., 2009). Overall, foster children have scored in the same ranges on developmental tests as high-risk children who were not in the foster care system. These scores included a comparison with high risk children such as children living in poverty and homeless children (Haeley & Fisher, 2011). Some studies have also found that foster care children have poorer grades and higher rates of being held back and placement in special education (Harden, 2001, Shin, 2004 & Zlotnick, Tam, & Soman, 2012). Educational challenges can result in stigma from being older than most of the children in their current grade, and nearly 45% of youth in the New York State foster care system reported being held back at least once in school (Pecora, 2012).

A few studies have focused on the early stages of the life course of children in foster care. A study focusing on the impact of Early Childhood Education on the development of high risk children including foster care children noted that, "such ECE attendance may be important given that children in foster care tend to have fewer educational experiences at home than other children" (Libscomb & Pears, 2011, p. 2807). It is important to consider if the communication patterns of foster parents and teachers could impact the inclusion of educational experiences at home for foster children. Would there be more chances of involvement of educational experiences in the home if foster parents were communicated to about the importance and impact on their foster child's success?

The lower rate of school attendance of foster children has been noted as due to the placement instability of the foster care system, and a contributor to poorer educational success (Pecora, 2012). These attendance trends may be due to the high mobility of foster

care placements causing children to miss days of school or suddenly change schools throughout the year. There is a trend of the highest school mobility being experienced by children entering the foster care system for the first time. A Chicago Public School system focused study revealed that over two-thirds of the 16,000 children had switched schools shortly after their initial placement in foster care (Pecora, 2012).

The connection between the educational success of children and the impact of other outside risk factors involved in a foster child's life has been a focus of study. Pecora (2012) designed a study proposing that success in school can be a positive counterweight to abuse, neglect, separation and high mobility experienced. Education was found to have the potential to create intense improvement of life changes and their ability to progress into productive adults of society. Educational success of foster children was found to be improved by; pursuit of placement permanency, identification and treatment of mental health, and optimal educational support from multiple systems (Pecora, 2012). It was also discovered by the study that there are remarkable numbers of children in foster care who are not succeeding in the educational system and the "various genetic, environmental, parent–child interaction, community and other factors, not the least of which might be child abuse or neglect, contribute to the higher rates of certain emotional and behavioral disorders of children in care and can interfere with learning" (Pecora, 2012, p. 1123).

Cross-Systems Barriers

The participation of important surrounding environments and the care providers involved in those institutions serves at the key focal point of the present study (Simkiss, Stallard, & Thurgood, 2012). There is a desire to convey and understand the dynamics of

the communication patterns and potential barriers involved in their success. Joint training has been suggested for involving cross-agency protocol for documenting the educational needs of children (McLean, 2011). This would involve the communication of that information across the systems the foster child is involved in. This type of incorporation of the perspectives of key stakeholders and care givers has been limited in study even though it has been strongly suggested that the perspectives of those involved in the daily care of foster care children are important to consider to fully capture the complex dynamics of such collaboration (McLean, 2011).

In a study of perceived best policies and procedures involved in collaboration and communication of multiple systems in the life of a foster child, Noonan and colleagues (2012) found two major concerns identified by all groups involved. One concern involved a general variability around the knowledge and implementation of policies within the foster care system and education system. Group members belonging to each systemic environment reported a lack of consistency in their knowledge of the policies impacting their role. Within the study, none of participants included in each stakeholder group revealed the same knowledge of procedure related to education systems of foster children (Noonan, et al., 2012). The second concern was for the limited understanding of caseworkers, counselors, teachers, and foster parents about relevant policies and procedures (Noonan, et al., 2012). The disclosure of information and behavioral health-related services was particularly highlighted with variation of understanding across the systems. These concerns allude to dynamic barriers involved in the consistency and communication of each systemic environment created within the lives of foster care children.

The expectations of respect and perceived nature of communication have been a topic of inquiry among foster parents and residential care workers (Lewis, 2011). For example, some foster parents, when asked, noted that they didn't like the way the residential care worker spoke to them over the phone (Lewis, 2011). Stakeholders have been found to discount the views of child statutory workers, child mental health professionals and other mobile (not present on a daily basis) individuals in the children's lives (McLean, 2011). The participants displayed a perspective that those mobile professionals had a knowledge that was underdeveloped, and because of that they found it difficult to work with them (McLean 2011). This brings up systemic barriers possibly involved in the communication of viewpoints of those who have intimate knowledge of a child's behavior with individuals who are in more of a peripheral role. The concern was highlighted when some cases involved a disagreement between the participant groups about the existence of a problem behavior or the intervention needed (McLean, 2011).

Participants in the McLean (2011) study expressed the desire to develop more child-centered practices in response to frustration. For example, a request noted of the policies and practices of each systemic environment was that they become more aligned. The participants were looking for consistency among the several policies of the variety of services involved in the child's development (McLean, 2011). Group members also reported that "through better communication, differences in processes, practices and frameworks could be 'demystified' and made more transparent" (McLean, 2011, p. 481).

Cross systems barriers were also highlighted by the study done by Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shae (2009) in which the barriers were divided into general categories involving, agency attitudes/organization, communication/collaboration, legal

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violation/issue, lack of knowledge, and lack of educational resources. Communication or collaboration between agencies has been labeled as a barrier in moving forward on an education agenda for foster children. Studies have shown a lack of developed processes within agencies for sharing data about individual children with the schools the foster care children attend (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009). The child welfare and foster care agencies involved did not typically have school outcome data to track the school progress of the children they were assigned.

In addition, the considerations included grade point averages, standardized test scores, and accumulated credits. All of this would seem important to communicate across systems, yet there are barriers that exist preventing that at times. For example, barriers related to communication and collaboration of systems led to delays or difficulty in foster youth receiving certain education or mental health services. Agencies were found to be shortcoming in the communication between units in the same agency (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009). There was also a lack of cooperation from the foster family agencies on the educational placements for the children in their homes (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009). Because of this lack of communication, agency units were not aware of what other units were doing in relation to the education of the foster children as well (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009).

Foster Parents

Foster parents have taken on a unique task at the very least. There is a requirement of complete adaptation and flexibility on the behalf of current and future foster parents. Although flexibility is critical, consideration of the impact of the home system experience on the foster child is important as well. Communication to foster

parents and by foster parents can optimize the little stability children do hold on to while placed in out-of-home care. When asked to give suggestions on the best collaborative efforts, foster parents recommended the agency include them as active team members by providing more information about histories of the child (Palinkas et al., 2014 & Spielfogel, Leather, Christian, & MvMeel, 2011). Foster parents have also alluded to the necessity of knowing what occurred during parental visits with biological parents, and the impact of joint meetings or trainings with staff (Spielfogel et al., 2011).

The collaborative meetings can be used to create cohesiveness in the known best practices of supporting and caring for foster children. Foster parents identified positive impacts on a child's success in the home and school. Benefit is seen in the child receiving consistent messages about the consequences of their behavior from the multiple adults around them (foster parents, caseworkers, and therapists) (Spielfogel et al., 2011). The joint meetings may also create stronger working relationships between foster parents and the agency and impact the strength of the systems supporting the children.

Foster parents have found it difficult to connect with the therapist assigned to their foster child and prefer that they make a better effort in including them in the process of treatment (Megahead & Lee, 2011). Parents wanted to be included because they knew they spent the most time with the child and could probably inform the therapists of behavior patterns and experiences. A parent talked about having the experience of being distanced from the collaboration between the therapist and foster agency. "Sometimes they [therapist] don't want to keep you as part of the equation. 'Well this is between me and the child and the caseworker.' It's like, well alright, the caseworker isn't here at night when the kid's hitting the window" (Spielfogel et al., 2011, p. 2371). This is the

perspective that the present study will be looking for as well, the acknowledgement of the foster parents' perspective as an expert lens.

The lack of communication was avoided by more experienced foster parents who knew to ask for certain information about the child they were placing in their home. But unfortunately newer foster parents without this knowledge were often surprised by disruptive behaviors displayed by a recently placed foster child (Spielfogel et al., 2011). The view of foster parents requests a thorough and proactive informing of the child's needs and histories with biological parents. Foster parents also have a need of reviewing with the foster care agency effective ways in which they can address the potential foster child's needs before they enter their home (Spielfogel et al, 2011 & Palinkas et al., 2014). This communication from the foster care agency can create a smooth transition for the foster child as well as the foster parents into the home environment.

Foster parents also have experiences of the impact of fragmentation and triangulation of their foster child's relationships (Leathers, 2003). For example, some foster parents experience difficulty in maintaining behavioral problems of their foster child because the foster child has identified their social worker as the only person they have to listen to (Leathers, 2003). A barrier to family structure and the child's positive engagement in family rituals and routines is noted as a consequence of such triangulation (Spielfogel et al., 2011). There is a disruption of the family structure by the separation of caregiving tasks. The separating can be attributed to the regulations of the agency.

A parent described their experience with this *"When they brought their [school] reports home we always made it a special event and went to Hungry Jack's for dinner. [Child's name] wasn't allowed to bring her report home to me, she had to take it to the*

[Statutory Department] office and they would send it to me in the post a few weeks later. It spoilt the whole specialness, family time'. (Female foster parent, age 64)" (Palinkas, et al., 2014, p. 80).

Such a perspective with rich quotes will be reflected upon in the present study as well. These experiences can affect a child's perspective on their place and inclusion within their foster family. Another impact can be made on their motivation to sustain the relationships around them.

Foster Care Agencies

The collaboration of foster parents and foster care agencies is an effective way to support children with multiple needs (Palinkas, et al., 2014). When children in out of home placement begin to exhibit challenging and problem behavior they require the services of multiple agencies. A study of stakeholders including foster parents, teachers, child welfare workers, child mental health professionals and residential caseworkers asked participants to reveal their experience of collaborative practice. When they asked about the supporting of children with extremely challenging behavior it was found that the most successful services provide access to interventions involving collaboration among multiple agencies, especially for children with complex needs. This is also true for children who possess overlapping health and social needs (Palinkas, et al., 2014).

With that in consideration, it is important to have collaborative provision and programming between agencies in the supporting of children in foster care. As reviewed earlier, foster care children encounter the overlapping of risk factors and needs and to support them there must be a priority in researching and implementing the best communication practices. Palinkas and colleagues (2014) suggested this as well, revering

multi-agency collaboration as critical to effective interventions used with children in foster care. This however is a lacking priority within research when it comes to the involvement of multiple agencies and services and collaborative efforts to support children with challenging behaviors in foster care.

Communication patterns such as clear communication, clarity of terminology, and understanding the conceptual frameworks of others are important to collaborative practices (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). Participants involved in multiple stakeholder groups expressed the need to see things from another's perspective (Palinkas, et al., 2014). There was also a highlighted trend of them not taking negative views of others' approaches. When there was a multi-dimensional involvement, the participants were likely to advocate for the need to destruct communication barriers and to debunk differences in perspectives (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012).

Another dimension discovered in the barriers to efficient collaboration of agencies is the failure to communicate parameters of behavior in the effort to optimize the likelihood of interacting with a school, service or placement site. The essential information regarding the triggers of the problem behavior was not available to foster parents, and other caregivers (Palinkas, et al., 2014). There are examples of teaching staff and mental health workers not being aware of issues that happened during parental visitations (Leathers, 2003), as well as a lack of knowledge of significant changes in the foster child's life. These are suggested to be critical pieces of information for a child to be understood and provided with the best experience by their teachers. The communication barriers and short comings of some agencies can impede on the sufficient education of children whom they are institutionally responsible for. We must remain

diligent in improving the collaboration of the systems surrounding foster children to increase the accountability of all those enlisted to support them. The foster parent perspective is expected to give the present study a direct insight on the existence of these barriers to effective communication with foster agencies as well.

Teachers of Foster Children

The educators of children in foster care also have specific experiences surrounding the manifestation of the impact of risk factors involved in the child's life. Mentioned earlier were the likely behavior disturbances and patterns that can be difficult to manage without proper training and knowledge. Over all, there is increasing evidence of the importance of interpersonal relationships in a student's choice to stay in school or leave early (drop-out) (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Low-income, minority, at risk children especially long for a sense of belonging and attachment (Hook & Courtney, 2013). The expression of confidence in the student by the teacher can set a strong foundation for building positive interpersonal relationships and learning experiences. When the confidence is paired with respect, teachers encourage students to motivate themselves and support their efforts in doing so (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Foster system alumni who dropped out of school expressed overwhelmingly that teachers didn't care for them and had no interest in their educational success. There is also a claim of teachers being unwilling to help them with problems (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Consider again, the importance of communication about a child's problem behaviors to the teacher before the child enrolls to help them know what to expect.

Teachers of foster children must also be aware of the research suggesting that parental engagement practices are related to positive outcomes like increased academic

performance, motivation and social competence (Jacobs, 2013). There are also potential barriers involved with building strong parent-teacher communication. Parents' beliefs about their role in their child's education can be shaped by their perception of the invitations they receive from teachers encouraging their involvement with the school (Jacobs, 2013). It is also suggested that parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds find it difficult to actively participate in their child's education because of prior interactions and perceptions of school settings. For example, when parents perceived the relationship with their child's teacher as negative, they were less involved with school engagement activities (Jacobs, 2013).

The importance of parent-teacher relationships has been declared federally by policies that advocate for the inclusion of a parental involvement plan for teachers and schools (Davis & Dupper, 2004). This plan documents expectations of the desired attempts to building relationships from all people involved. The requirement of Title I of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandates schools create school-parent compacts, a written agreement between parents and teachers that outlines the school's perspective of effective partnerships (Jacobs, 2013). There is a listing of responsibilities of all parties as they collaborate in supporting the child and their education. The compacts are given to all parents of children who attend the school in the district as an attempt to reach all households, especially those of at risk children.

Behind the documentation of efforts to communicate, there must be a belief the teachers and parents have much to communicate about. This can build a successful and mutually satisfying partnership between home and school. Gelfer & Perkins (2012) suggest that "the happiest and successful teacher regards parents as partners and friends

in the effort to educate children" (p. 19). The initial step in this effort to forge effective collaboration starts with careful planning and organization on behalf of teachers. It is suggested that parent-teacher communication be documented and kept in parent-teacher portfolios including things like notes and requests made in writing by parents, telephone conversation notes and developmental checklists. Portfolios like these can help parents increase their understanding of physical, social, emotional and cognitive development of their children. When parents are communicated with by teachers of these aspects of their child's education this can strengthen the parent's ability to provide parent-child educational experiences (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012).

When parents receive frequent and effective communication from teachers they are found to have a higher overall evaluation of the teacher as well as a sense of comfort with the school (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). The motivation of children has also been impacted positively by the frequent communication between parent and teacher. Helping teachers develop a sense of confidence in involving parents can be an important component in encouraging teachers to develop parent involvement programs (Ames, Stefano, Watkins, & Sheldon, 1995).

Based on the previous review of literature, and existing research the study addresses the foster parent perspective as the expert on the educational experience of foster children and the communication patterns the foster parent experiences with other key stakeholders. Through the theoretical framework, the study uncovers the phenomena experienced by foster parents in regards to the educational experience of the foster child. The theoretical framework is also used to reveal the essence of the perspective of foster parents on the communication patterns they experience and perceived barriers to effective

communication. It is the goal of the study to impact the knowledge and practice of

effective communication among adults assigned to foster children to create successful

educational experiences for them.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Qualitative Research Strategy

Qualitative research design will be the research strategy used for the present study. Qualitative methods allow the participants to provide a look into their experiences through their individual responses (Maxwell, 2005). There is also the opportunity for the participants to have a voice and empowerment from telling their stories within the interviews conducted (Maxwell, 2005). The interviews involved in qualitative research provide data that is deep and rich, and this data is obtained, organized, and analyzed to reach themes and conclusions (Maxwell, 2005). The present study conducted one on one, in-person interviews with foster parents to get their expert narratives on the educational experience of foster children and their collaboration with other stakeholders.

Role of Researcher

It is important to acknowledge and establish values, biases and personal interests about research when conducting research of interpretative nature (Creswell, 2013). Because interviewing is the main approach to collecting data the personal experiences of the research can impact the perception and interpretations of the data. The academic, work, and personal background experiences of researchers can lead them toward particular ways of conducting interviews and perceiving the responses of participants.

My interest in communication patterns of primary care givers on educational success of foster children stems from the experience of a close friend who is a foster parent. I witnessed a multitude of negative experiences for her when she was trying to communicate with workers at the foster care agency and the teachers of her foster

children. Ultimately the lack of effective communication by the surrounding systems in the case of a sibling group of three brothers led to their removal from her home and separation in placements. I saw a problem in the long-term decision making based on rumors or perceived nature of parental practices by teachers and agency workers who did not consider her perspective as the foster parent.

These personal experiences have created certain biases related to the present study. It is my perspective that all primary care givers in the lives of foster children need to communicate frequently and effectively in order to provide the children with the best opportunity for educational success. In an effort to minimize the influence of this bias, every attempt possible was made to remove personal experiences out of the interviewing process and atmosphere. There was limited to no discussion of my personal history as to allow the participants to give honest and personal accounts of their experiences. Topics of discussion were clearly defined and guided throughout the interview as to not stray from the intended purity of participant responses as well.

Sampling

There was a combination of sampling methods used when seeking participants. Criterion sampling was used to reach experienced foster parents. Criterion sampling involves using a collection of screening criteria that the participants must meet in order to be included in the sample (Creswell, 2013). For this study, the criteria of being a foster parent for at least 6 months was used. Also, foster parent participants must have at least one foster child living in their home currently. Participants had to meet all of these to be included in the sample.

Snowball sampling was utilized to reach additional participants for the study. Snowball sampling involves the collection by the researcher, of contact information of additional persons who may meet the criteria and can participate in the study (Creswell, 2013). The participants were asked if they knew of other adults involved in a foster child's life in the capacity the criterion requires. This method was used to help gather enough participants to achieve depth of the data.

Participant Recruitment and Description

To reach the target population of participants a few recruitment strategies were used. Flyers were constructed detailing the purpose and nature of the present study. Interested persons were instructed to call the researcher to give demographic information and screening for criteria. These flyers were placed in the University of Kentucky community by placing flyers around campus in attempts to reach a variety of persons interested and qualified. Also, I sought to make in person contact with possible participants at different sites, including local foster care agencies. Participants were compensated with $50 for completing all research activities. Funds for compensation were provided through the Kathryn Louise Chellgren Endowment.

The final sample included five participants. The sample was comprised of five females and zero males. Demographic details and characteristics of participants are provided in Table 1 (also seen in Appendix F).

Table 1. Summary of Participant Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Education Attained	# of Biological Children	# of Foster Children	Years of Foster Parent Experience
Ashley*[1]	Female	24	High School	0	3	3
Dorothy*	Female	54	High School	3	3	2
Emily*	Female	36	Bachelor of Science	0	1	4
Katherine*	Female	43	High School	3	3	4
Tawana*	Female	50	High School	2	3	3

Procedures

Data includes responses from experienced foster parents. The type of information collected was demographic information and interview responses of each participant. The data was collected using a demographic questionnaire (Appendix C) and conducting audio recorded in-person individual interviews following the protocol.

Interviews were conducted with consenting adult participants. Participants were asked questions about their experience of communication with the other adults involved in the life of the foster care child they encounter. The questions asked participants to

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[1] * Pseudonym was given to protect participant's confidentiality; names used in the manuscript are not participants' real names.

describe in detail different aspects of communication patterns, including frequency, topic content, and perceived value of communication. There was a focus on any perceived impact of communication patterns on the foster child's educational success. An example of this is, "What is the impact of your communication with the teacher on the child's educational success?"

Participants were asked to describe their recommendations for successful communication strategies. Interview questions asked participants to describe any important aspects of their position that can impact the way they want to be communicated with. For example, participants were asked, "What are some of your suggestions for communicating with social workers and teachers effectively?" Participants were also be asked to reveal their experience of communicating across systems. For example, "What is it like to communicate with foster care agency workers?" All questions asked will be guided by the central and sub questions of the study as well as the goal to get at the true essence of the experience. (For a full list of interview protocol and questions, see Appendix B.)

Data Analysis

Once the data was collected from each individual interview, data analysis began with the transcription of the audio recordings. There was a high priority of continuity in the recorded data and the transcriptions. The researcher then analyzed the data for common themes and ideas. The researcher created a well-informed written detailing of the study and results.

Validation Strategies

There were validation strategies (Creswell, 2013) used to achieve effective and informed conclusions of the current study. First, triangulation (Creswell, 2013) was used to create a comprehensive approach to describing and clarifying the experiences detailed in the literature review. Another validation strategy that was used is peer review. The researcher's thesis committee provided professional review and recommendations before and during the study and data analysis process. This promoted an academic and objective methodology and analysis of data. Additionally, I used rich, thick descriptions, including quotations from participants to provide a valid account of the experiences described by the participants as well as their suggestions of best practices in effective communication.

Evaluation Criteria

In order to create an evaluation for the quality of the current study the researcher continually evaluated the study by reviewing the following criteria. I evaluated if there was any influence on the contents of the participants' responses. I also carefully evaluated any sudden changes in responses from participants throughout the interviews. This helped to make sure there is a true reflection of the participants' experience. Also the transcription was studied to ensure there is an accurate representation of the oral presentation in the interview. There was an evaluation of the researcher's understanding of the qualitative interview and process of study. It was determined that the experiences studied were clearly defined and described throughout the study. The detailing and description of the essence of the participants' experience was evaluated as well. The compilation of data and conclusions was peer reviewed by academic peers and evaluated by the graduate committee members.

Chapter 4

Findings

The goal of this study was to uncover the foster parent perspective on the foster child's educational experience and the communication patterns they experience with other key stakeholders. The foster parent was seen as having the expert lens and this study aimed to share their experience as a way to impact knowledge and practice related to creating successful collaboration and educational experiences for foster children. In person interviews were conducted with five foster parents in the Lexington, Kentucky area. Participants were asked a series of questions about the educational experience of their foster children, and the communication patterns they experience with social workers, and teachers.

At the time of the study, all five participants were fostering at least one child. Three of the participants were foster parents to three children, and two of the participants were foster parents to one child. All of the participants had been foster parents in some capacity for over one year. One of the foster parents had five years of experience, two foster parents had four years of experience, one foster parent had three years of experience, and one foster parent had two years of experience. The participants were between the ages of 24 and 54; all were female. At the time of the interview four participants had attained a high school diploma, and one participant had attained a Bachelor of Science. Of the five participants, two had no biological children, one participant had two biological children, and two had three biological children. A summary of participant characteristics can be found in Table 1 (Appendix D).

Inductive coding was used to analyze the data produced by the interviews (Creswell, 2013). Interviews were coded by educational experience of foster children, communication experiences, and impact of collaboration on educational experiences. Central themes that emerged across interviews are presented as follows: past experiences of foster child impact their educational experience, the teacher-child relationship impacts the foster child's educational experience, and consistency of expectations impacts the foster child's educational experience.

Past Experiences of Foster Child

To reveal the foster parent's perspective on their foster child's educational experience, participants were asked to describe the educational experience to the interviewer. On several occasions the participants mentioned the impact of the negative past experiences of the foster child and how that had an impact on how the child adapted to a school environment, how they interact with peers, and how they behave in the classroom. All participants were adamant about the ways the past is still impacting the present.

When asked about her foster child's educational experience, Dorothy attributed some of the misbehavior in the classroom to past experiences:

> "I tell people, you think he's like that because he wants to be? He's like that because of his circumstance and his lifestyle has allowed him to be. So when we are quick to say a kid is bad, you don't know what he been through, you don't know what his days have been like, you don't know what he had to deal with going into the group home, his mother's on drugs, no food in the ice box."

She continues on with the implications past experiences have on how adults interact with them:

> "So when you're dealing with the kids, you're dealing with so many different things. You're trying to help them fit in, but you're also dealing with the things of

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their past. Not to try and erase it but to get them to a safe place. So you're dealing with so many things with them, and it affects their grades."

Another foster parent, Ashley, talks about the longevity of the impact of being

separated from biological parents on foster children:

"It's the end of a parent, and they're smart, they always grew up in an adult setting and they were always able to hang around adults so they just know, and that's what breaks your heart, because they will be hurt by this for the rest of their lives. It's not something that just goes away when they are 18."

Dorothy also mentioned the impact of separation:

"Can you imagine going into foster care? You're stripping him from everything, his mom, his dad, his cousins, everything. And then you expect him to act normal in school? Surely you can't expect him to act the same as a kid who has both mother and father at home, eats dinner by 5pm, and in the bed by 9:30pm"

Others mentioned how the past experiences impact the foster child's motivation:

"I think his experience back when he was with them [biological parents], the lack of education at that point, set the framework for his lack of attention and unwillingness to do school work."

Foster parent Emily talks about the label that comes with the past experiences:

"And so if I got this label that I'm the bad kid or I'm the kid that his momma left him, or I'm the kid that nobody wants, my behavior will reflect that."

Dorothy also mentions this label and how it impacts peer relationships:

"Well for one of my kids, who is in the 7th grade, it was really hard going into school as a foster kid, because he didn't want to be different, he didn't want to be classed as different and that was really important to him. So what we did is, I'm grandma to him. So that there wouldn't have to be any labels. And it made him a little more comfortable with the kids at school and even with me. So that when people ask him, he can say I'm his grandmother."

She continues:

"And the other thing is that kids at school tease him. And so that's another constant reminder to him that he is different, and his momma left."

Ashley mentions the impact of a label on peer relationships:

"And because they are in foster care, they always compare themselves to other people. It's like they never want to be the different one. And it makes them be more interested in hangin' out and going with the crowd instead of doing the work they know they have to do."

Ashley also talks about the impact of past experiences causing them to adjust to

new environments:

"Going back to school they were nervous about all of the changes, new kids on the bus stop, they had to get used to living in our home and being in a large family, how to get ready in the morning, how to make sure you have enough time, so I feel like it impacted everything. At first I feel like they thought one day they would come home from school and their mom would be there. They didn't seem to think it was long term."

All participants expressed a relationship between the past experiences of the

foster child and their educational experience. The theme emerged, that the experiences of

being separated from their biological parents impacted the way the foster child behaved

in the classroom, the peer relationships, and how they performed academically.

Teacher-Child Relationships

As the inquiry about the educational experience of foster children continues,

another emerging theme that was present across interviews was the impact of the teacher-

child relationship on the educational experience. All participants talked about their

perspective on how important it is for the teacher to establish a good, respectful

relationship with the foster child.

Emily expresses this importance:

"With teachers I feel like the personal connection with the student plays a big factor. There is more need to talk to the ones who don't have a good connection because there were always problems in those classes."

Katherine also exclaimed the importance:

"I think his relationship with his teachers is really important, and the teachers that he establishes a good relationship with, he does better in their classroom."

Ashley mentions the impact on grades:

"Even if it's just a few emails between you two, the kids know that you know them and can and will talk to them frequently. I think my child made a better grade in the Spanish class because she and the teacher had such a great relationship. I mean sometimes I don't want to talk to the teacher but I know if I do the teacher will reach out to her and then she will be more comfortable to talk to her in future situations."

Tawana talks about how having a positive teacher-child relationship can help with

awareness of issues and dealing with them:

"The other two kids I had, didn't talk to the teacher a lot, this one talks to the teacher a lot, and they see signs were she is struggling and having problems. Um she's a handful, (laughs) they call me every time she has trouble, with the lying and stuff. But I like that they stay on top of it, they sit down and talk to her and let her know what's right and what's wrong. That really helps her have good days."

Some participants insisted that because the child was in foster care and had

history of misbehavior, teachers treated them differently.

Ashley mentions:

"You know, you can tell a difference between the ways they discipline different children. They seem to judge their perspective of the child, by their attitude and the ways they perform."

Tawana also talks about the teachers not having a positive outlook:

"Even the teachers, they treat them different. I've been to the school several times over my kid and it's because they already have a picture painted of him, and they won't even give him a chance. And that's not good. They know that this is the foster kid, they know this is the 'lil bad one'. And most of the time they want a history of behavior, and that's how they start judging them from the beginning."

Dorothy expresses her perspective on the reasoning behind the lack of teacher-

child personal relationship:

"When he's around me, he is a totally different kid than when he's under other people's care because he doesn't respect them. Why would he when you are always pushing him away when he does something wrong, or always telling him

to sit down and be quiet? He needs somebody to reassure him that whatever you're going through it's going to be okay, and he doesn't have that at school."

Consistency of Expectations

The third theme that was uncovered by inquires on the foster child's educational experience was the impact of consistent expectations in all environments. The foster parents expressed the importance of the foster child knowing what is expected of them and their behavior. Participants talked about how communication between stakeholders created some consistency.

Katherine talks about setting expectations for behavior:

"And especially when they do something wrong, my communication with the teachers about what is going on shows them that she can't get away with sneaking things in school. It shows them there are the same expectations. And I think it shows them, this is how much we care about you, we will go talk to them so that you know we want you to succeed. That's why I always go to the open houses and talk to the teachers, so they know who you are and that you want to be involved."

Emily also mentions behavioral expectations across environments:

"When she's telling fibs on other kids, the teacher watches to see if the kids are doing what she says they are doing. They watch her, and come to find out they not doing anything, it's her telling fibs on them. And when the teacher addresses her she just sits there, and the teacher lets her know it's not nice to lie on people, you can get them in trouble. And she knows what she's doing is wrong, it's just she's determined to keep doing it. And when they tell me I get on her about it too so that she knows I expect the same things."

A sub-theme that emerged from the central theme of consistency in expectations is the impact of biological parents on the consistency. Several participants talked about the ways the biological parents undermine the foster parents', social workers', and teachers' expectations. There was a double-bind expressed about the communication with biological parents and the apparent negative impacts the communication has on educational experiences.

Ashley expressed the impact:

"Depending on how the children feel about their biological parents, it can make or break the house they now live in. You know some kids they leave their biological parents hating them. And then when you cut the parents off it's like they are mourning them, but they are more likely to be the ones that connect more with you, but when you have kids where their mother may still be around, and she's like a cancer instead of being someone to who is trying to get their lives together that ruins them."

Tawana talks about the pattern:

"What it is, is that he's in contact with his [biological] mom. If there is anything ever wrong with the mom, he's going to have a bad day. So he balances his behavior, his joy, on 'if my mom's okay I'm okay'. So we are in a place where mom may have to get cut off. Now I've begun to see the pattern, and I have had to make decisions that will help him overcome this."

Dorothy also talks about having to make the decision of limiting contact:

"They was having phone calls every Friday, but I stopped that, she [biological mother] always has something negative to say and I'm not with that because then the child begins to say the same things and feel the same ways, just because her momma said so. So I had to make a decision, and I feel like right now has to be about school and if her momma can't help with that, I don't know what to tell her."

Tawana goes further to talk about the pressure that is put on the foster child from

the inconsistency:

"But then what happens is when they go see her she's telling the older one not to let the younger ones forget about her. So she kind of keeps reminding them of her and tells them what she says. Now he don't know who to trust and who to listen to. So he has a lot of pressure. And as a foster parent I have to understand that. I have to respect that. I can't expect him to be a happy go lucky kid and be able to focus in school with all this stuff going on."

Dorothy also proclaimed the impact passionately:

"It is hard! Like when she is on a behavior chart and she's getting in trouble I tell her, no you have to stop talking and listen to the teacher, but mom don't. She's like no you don't have to do that, she's on the other side. When she doing wrong, instead of mom saying, no you shouldn't do that, she says, 'things happen,' that what she tells me. How is that helping her do good in school?"

Katherine explains a similar perspective:

"Yes, she don't do no wrong with mom. When she talks to mom she lies to her, I guess to make her feel good, and we try to tell her no, tell the truth. But mom believes everything she says, everybody is out to get her, and like I tell them that's not true, you know, we are there for her, not to hurt her. It's not working, and every time she talks to mom her behavior is horrible at school the next day, it is crazy."

Emily talks about the double-bind she experiences when her foster child communicates with their biological parent:

"When they are contacting [biological] parents and when their parents are still in their lives, every time they visit them it's kind of a withdrawal, it makes them backslide. You would think it would be a good thing but what that does is, it's a constant reminder of where they are. So that's the battle that we are battling."

Summary of Major Themes

The major themes that emerged from the inquiry of the educational experience of foster children involved the past experiences of the foster child, teacher-child relationships, and the consistency of expectations. The past experiences of the foster child created lasting impacts on classroom behavior, academic performance, and peer relationships. Participants also talked about the separation from biological parents and how that separation made it hard for foster children to adjust to the new environments.

The personal relationships between the teacher and foster child was heavily discussed by the participants. There was an expression of importance of positive, close relationships. Participants talked about how the label of being a foster child may have created a negative perspective for the teachers, causing them to be less likely to establish personal relationships. All participants agreed that when the relationships between the teacher and foster child are positive the child does better with classroom behavior, and academically.

Consistency of expectations across environments was also mentioned as an important impact on the foster child's educational experience. Participants talked about the ways they create consistency with the teachers and social workers. The sub-theme of the biological parents undermining the expectations was also expressed heavily. Participants mentioned the difficulty in trying to help the child progress and the constant "backsliding" that comes with communication with biological parents. Some foster parents decided to cut back communication with the biological parent so that the foster child could maintain a positive outlook.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Implications

This chapter will focus on the implications of the findings and how they relate to the three central research questions. The findings will also be related to the theoretical framework of the study as well as the preceding literature review. Further research implications will be addressed, followed by the limitations of the study. The chapter will end with the conclusion of the study.

Findings Related to Research Questions

1. What are the communication patterns of adults involved in the education and care of foster children?

This question was addressed in several instances throughout the data collection. Participants described the communication patterns they experienced in terms of five factors; (1) method of communication, (2) frequency, (3) topic of communication, (4) ease of access, and (5) responsiveness. Most foster parents considered email the best method of communication with teachers. Ashley talks about her preference for email:

> "…but usually I talk to them via email, it's just easier, and I don't want to talk to them on the phone, so I email them. Plus they shouldn't be able to talk on the phone because they are busy teaching."

> Emily also preferred email as the method of communication with teachers:

> "I usually do emails, plus they are teaching and I don't expect them to be reachable through phone."

Furthermore, common methods of communication with social workers also involved email, with the addition of phone calls, text messages, and in person meetings. Katherine talks about enjoying the communication with her foster child's social worker:

"With the social worker, I have their cell number so I can call them and text them more often. Which I think is great because the social worker is supposed to be another support system for the child and if I can contact them and reach them it really helps."

Dorothy expressed a gratitude for communication with social workers over the phone as well:

"And I was so thankful that I could reach her [social worker] on her cell phone because I had forgotten about her allergies and the social worker knew exactly what to do."

Most of the participants expressed a high frequency of contact with both teachers and social workers. Some participants like Tawana and Katherine had a set schedule of communication frequency. Tawana explains:

"I talk to the social worker all the time. I just got on a routine with her, so I know that every Thursday at 4pm I will be getting a call from her."

Katherine reveals a similar experience:

"After the twins came to live with us, we almost had to make a schedule because we were already talking so much. If it wasn't about one, it was about the other one. So now we just make it a habit to call each other on Mondays and Wednesdays. And really we end up talking the other days too."

Other participants like Dorothy did not have a set schedule of communication but still expressed a high frequency of communication with social workers. Dorothy mentions:

"I mean we talk all the time on the phone, and we see each other at different meetings and around the agency. We don't really have a set day but it just happens that we talk a lot."

There was a consistent pattern of misbehavior being the topic of communication among foster parents, teachers, and social workers. Some participants were okay with this while others expressed a desire for a more balanced topics of communication. Tawana explains her experience of communication topics with social workers:

"We usually just talk about their behavior, whenever they act up in school or if they start having trouble at home with me I'll talk to the social worker. They talk to the kids about it too. But yea really we just talk about them actin' up."

Katherine revealed she shares a similar perspective:

"We communicate because we have a stubborn 12 year old who is a lil' manipulative, so every few days we get a call from school. They'll tell us everything that is going on. I would like it if there were less issues that we had to talk about, but the communication is adequate. So most communication is about issues, or when things aren't going well."

Dorothy expressed misbehavior as the main topic of communication with teachers:

"Now communicating with the teacher is not always a good thing, because usually when I am talking to the teacher it's because he has done something wrong."

She also mentioned a dissatisfaction of the focus on negative behaviors:

"It's not like I get a praise report of things he does right. No, it's usually 'you need to come get him because we can't handle him' or something like that. And really it's a group of them, because one day I had to go to the school and they were all sitting around and none of them had anything good to say about him."

The ease of access to communication with teachers and foster parents was praised by participants across the board. All the foster parents talked about it being easy to contact the teachers and social workers, and the high responsiveness experienced.

Tawana explains:

"All of the teachers I've dealt with as a foster parent have been pretty willing to help and talk to you. If you email them they are good about getting back to you. That's the same with social workers, they make sure they get back to you. So I don't have no issue with that part."

Emily raves about her foster child's social worker's responsiveness:

"He has a great social worker, she will make sure she calls you back. I always tell him how lucky he is that he has a social worker who cares and will go the extra mile to make sure everything is okay."

Dorothy agrees:

"Most of the social workers are really good about responding to me. I have had one or two that go too busy and it really showed. But I will give it to them, they do make it easy for you to get a hold of them."

Emily did have a negative experience with an unresponsive teacher:

"When I first got my foster child, I was talking to the teachers all the time, and they were responding to me. I wanted them to know that he had support at home. Well this semester it has been less, and granted I haven't communicated as much this semester, but even when I did email a teacher, they got back to me but it was a week later and after I had talked to the guidance counselor and asked them why they hadn't responded."

Researcher: "So the communication kind of dropped off once the relationship was established?"

Emily: "Yea. It was strange, I assume it was more about them being busier rather than it being about myself or my child."

All of the participants created a clear depiction of the communication patterns they experience with other key stakeholders. Generally, adults assigned to foster children communicate through email, phone call, text message and in person meetings. There is a high frequency of communication, and most of the communication is about misbehavior of the foster child in school or at home. Foster parents are generally satisfied with the ease of access to communication with teachers and foster parents, and they have experienced high responsiveness, except for a few experiences of drop off.

2. What is the impact of collaboration of foster care agency workers, foster parents, and teachers of children in foster care on the foster child's educational experience?

This question had two different perspectives revealed by the foster parents. Some of the foster parents did not believe there was a clear impact of their collaboration with teachers and social workers on the educational experience of their foster child. While other foster parents expressed that their communication with social workers and teachers

created a consistency for the child and was a form of modeling for the child to seek help

on their own at school.

Emily described her perspective:

> "I would assume that it would improve his education to some degree. Even though he's mortified and he's like 'oh my goodness, all my teachers said that you talked to them!', and I'm like, 'yes, yes I did'. But I don't know if it makes a big difference or not because he still can't seem to get it together."

Dorothy also expressed a lack of direct impact of communication:

> "I mean to be honest, I don't think it does anything. They are going do what they want to do, and I have had foster kids even tell me that they don't care, and that they aren't scared of us. It just made me feel like, how can make him understand that we are not against him. So until he stops fighting us, he is going to act up in school, no matter how much we talk."

Other participants mentioned a clear impact of communication, Ashley presents

her experience:

> "It helps them [foster children] know what I expect and that if they aren't going to do their work or meet those expectations I will find out. And I feel like with my child it has helped her because she is more willing to go up to the teacher to ask for help. It's kind of a dignity thing with that. I remember she was struggling and I asked her if she is getting help from her teacher and she said that the teacher doesn't care, and she acts like she doesn't want to help. The teachers don't usually give them one on one time, it's usually if you have a question you have to ask it in front of everyone and I can see how that is embarrassing. But once you get to a certain age I'm not asking for you every time. And I think it's a good way to show them, hey the last time I needed help, my foster mom got me help and now I need help again maybe I should ask first."

> Researcher: So there is a modeling that happens?

> Ashley: Yea I would say so. What they see me do, and how they see me communicating with the teacher, it shows them how they should be doing it."

Katherine also talked about the impact of communication on the consistency of

expectations and rules for home and school:

"And especially when they do something wrong, my communication with the teachers about what is going on shows them that she can't get away with sneaking things in school. It shows them there are the same expectations at home as at school. And I think it shows them, this is how much we care about you, we will go talk to them [teachers] so that you know we want you to succeed. That's why I always go to the open houses and talk to the teachers so they know who you are and that you want to be involved."

Tawana mentioned that her communication patterns also created motivation for her foster child to seek the teacher out for help:

"Yes most definitely, [my foster child] said she had to hunt her AP English teacher down and she wasn't responding to any of the emails she sent her. So she went to her office and said 'look I need your help,' and sat down and said 'help me do this worksheet'. And I think she did it because she know that's what I would've done."

This research question aimed to gain more perspective on the relationship between communication patterns of key stakeholders and the educational experience of foster children. The foster parents created a new perspective for the researcher from the findings. Some expressed that there was something more behind the misbehavior and negative educational experiences of foster children. Others revealed a clear impact on the consistency of expectations, as well as the motivation to ask teachers for help due to a modeling behavior from the foster parent.

3. From the foster parent perspective, what are the barriers involved with successful communication among foster care agency workers, foster parents, and teachers of children in foster care?

This research question aimed to get the expert perspective of the foster parent on the barriers to successful communication they experience with social workers and teachers of their foster children. The participants had varying experiences of barriers to communication. Some of the participants reflected on the workload/busyness of the social

worker and the interference with communication. Other participants shared experiences

of the teacher not taking her advice about how to talk to her foster child, while one

participant expressed a dislike for the "by the book" ways of the social workers. Emily

talked about how busy the social workers were:

Researcher: "What barriers to successful communication do you experience?"

Emily: "Well some social workers are way too busy, they are like road
runners when that happens, and when I'm trying to talk to them or call them, it's
like something is always coming up or there is somewhere they have to be."

Ashley had a similar experience with social workers:

"They [social workers] can be so busy sometimes. And I'll send them a detailed
email, and they'll scan it I know, but they're not going to read the whole thing.
And you know how I know? Because they start asking questions that were in the
email I sent, so of course they didn't read it all. So that definitely makes it hard
sometimes, 'cus if I can take the time to write you, at least take the time to read
what I send."

Tawana revealed a lack of educational conversations as a barrier to
communication she   experienced with social workers:

"With the social workers I feel like they don't communicate all of the resources
you get from being a foster parent. They don't educate foster parents enough. You
end up teaching yourself and learning through experience how to deal with each
child. And I feel like that is a barrier because it keeps you from being able to have
a good relationship and experience with the child."

Katherine was among the participants that expressed the barrier of not taking her
advice:

"You know one time I had to talk to the guidance counselor because his [foster
child's] teacher didn't listen to me and then tried to say he was in trouble. I mean
I know he can have a temper but when I tried to tell her when his therapy days
were and when would be good or bad days, she just didn't listen. But how hard
would that have been to just listen to me? I gave her all the information she
needed to make things smooth for him but that didn't happened, and that was
frustrating. I mean I even told her that I would come up there one day and show
her what to look for, and she didn't want that. So yea if they [teachers] aren't
going to listen to our advice how can we help our kids make progress. But she just
expected him to be like everybody else, and really, to me, she just wanted to
prove a point, 'my classroom, my ways', I guess."

Dorothy had a unique perspective on the barrier to communication she experienced with social workers. She began talking about the "by the book" and "on paper" aspect of her experience:

> "What gets in the way to me is that a lot of people stay more in the book. You know, someone wrote down in a book what they think a kid should be and they take it and check it off. So to me that gets in the way because every child is different. And everybody requires something different. And so that's the biggest barrier with social workers. When they say 'what do you do when they do this, or do that?' And 'm like, you know, what do you do? It just depends on who you're talking to. And you can't tell me to treat everyone the same way because you have to deal with a child on the level that they are on. Some people don't hear 'no'. It's easy to stand there with a piece of paper and tell me what I need to do, but you take that same child home with you and see if that paper applies to you. You wouldn't be able to go by the guidelines of the paper."

She continues:

> "You know everything is on paper with them. And that's why I don't really mess with them too often because so many people want to go by what's on paper that they forget about reality sometimes. I mean they just do what they are supposed to do, and I let them. But they aren't really my help source. They are basically for the kids not for me."

The variety of the barriers experienced by foster parents further implies the need for their perspectives to be heard and taken seriously. Each participant told their story about the ways adults assigned to foster children create barriers to communication and impact their educational and life experience. From feeling overlooked because of workload, to their advice not being taken seriously, and the inability to create real-world application of the literature the social workers are provided with, these barriers must be considered and eventually broken so that the educational experience of foster children can be improved.

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Findings Related to Theoretical Framework

This study examined the foster parent's perspective on the educational experience of foster children and the communication patterns of key stakeholders from the theoretical framework of Brofenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory. As previously discussed, this ecological theory created labels for the different environment experienced by children as they develop. This study fit well with this theory with the labeling of each ecological environment experienced by foster children. The microsystem includes the foster parents, teachers, and social workers of foster children. The mesosystem was determined in this case by the interaction among the stakeholders. The exosystem experienced by foster children is the over-arching foster care system they are involved in. And lastly the macrosystem is determined by the cultural beliefs of children in foster care. All of these environments interact with and influence the development of the foster child.

There were several findings that relate to this ecological theory. By using the lens of the foster parent as the expert, this study focused mostly on the microsystem and the mesosystem. Foster parents expressed several findings that involved the communication between them and the impact it had on the foster child. For example, as previously mentioned, Katherine felt her communication with her foster child's teachers was a way to show she cared:

> "It shows them there are the same expectations at home as at school. And I think it shows them, this is how much we care about you, we will go talk to them [teachers] so   that you know we want you to succeed. That's why I always go to the open houses and talk to the teachers so they know who you are and that you want to be involved."

Other findings were more revealing of the ineffective communication involved in the

mesosystem. Tawana mentions:

> "With the social workers I feel like they don't communicate all of the resources
> you get from being a foster parent. They don't educate foster parents enough."

Another individual involved in the microsystem that has a real impact on the

educational experience of foster children, as revealed by the findings, is the biological

parents. This data from Ashley speaks directly to the risky impact:

> "Depending on how the children feel about their biological parents, it can make or
> break the house they now live in. You know some kids they leave their biological
> parents hating them. And then when you cut the parents off its like they are
> mourning them, but they are more likely to be the ones that connect more with
> you, but when you have kids where their mother may still be around, and she's
> like a cancer instead of being someone to who is trying to get their lives together,
> that ruins them."

A unique finding that Dorothy provided created another connection to the

ecological theory used by this study. This foster parent expressed a disdain with the "by

the book" method of communication in the mesosystem. By doing so she also recognized

the influence of the exosystem experienced by the foster child, the foster care system.

The "by the book" nature Dorothy was mentioning was the foster care agencies way for

creating influence on the technique the social workers used to do their job. "The book"

she was referring to is the step by step instruction given to social workers by the foster

care agency to outline treatment techniuques. It is interesting that the foster parent

expressed this perspective as it shows an influence of the exosystem on not only the

foster child, but also the microsystem. It is assumed that this unique perspective may

come from the foster parent being selected by the foster care agency, while in other cases,

children in the care of their biological parents would not be involved in this type of

exosystem.

Finally the macrosystem, cultural beliefs of children in foster care, was also related to the findings of this study. Foster parents expressed an opinion that some teachers of their foster children give them "labels" or "treat them differently" because they are foster kids. This could be due to the cultural beliefs that children in foster care often come with behavioral misconduct and histories of being difficult to handle (Harris et al., 2009). The foster parents revealed that the foster child can also pick up on this impact from the microsystem.

> Emily explains:
>
> "You know, what is really sad about it all is that he [foster child] can sense it too. One time I just knew his teacher wasn't giving him the time of day because of how she felt about him being a foster kid. And sure enough, one day I ask him how his class is going and he says, "she don't like me," and he just hung his head, and right then I just knew. So they think these kids don't notice, and I'm just making it up, but they do notice."

Findings Related to Literature Review

The educational experience of children in foster care is being impacted by the communication patterns of the systems surrounding them (Noonan, et al., 2012). Children in foster care are not succeeding in the educational system, and the environments they experience, parent-child interaction, community involvement, and support from multiple systems are some factors that are influencing this trend (Pecora, 2011).Those involved in the daily care of foster children are important to consider to fully capture the complex dynamics of collaboration among those key stakeholders (McLean, 2011). Barriers related to communication and collaboration of systems leads to delay or difficulty in foster youth receiving certain educational or mental health services. The findings were consistent with previous literature on the all of these topics.

Firstly, the foster parents revealed a variety of ways that the communication patterns of the systems surrounding foster children impact their educational experience. Participants talked about the impact on peer relationships, behavior in the classroom, performance on academic tasks and grades, and the labeling experience. Several foster parents expressed the way their communication with other key stakeholders served as a model for their foster children. Also the communication between foster parents and teachers was seen to help create consistency in the expectations of the foster child. The consistency that was created from communication of key stakeholders was expressed as a successful practice in improving the foster child's behavior and overall educational experience.

Secondly, the importance of consideration of those involved in daily care of foster children was also revealed by the findings of this study. Each foster parent gave the researcher a close look into the experience of their foster children, and their experience of communication patterns with other stakeholders. The foster parents were also revealing their unique perspective on the ways communication can be improved as well as the improvement of the educational experience of their foster children. The importance of this perspective was reiterated throughout the interviews by the passion the foster parents expressed about their foster children. It was evident that their daily, up-close experience with the foster child gave them a clear depiction of the foster child's experience. None of the foster parents presented themselves as unknowledgeable about this topic of inquiry, and each participant proved themselves to be an expert with each story they told.

The collaboration of foster parents and foster care agency workers is an effective way to support children with multiple needs (Palinkas, et al., 2014). The findings were

split on this topic. Some findings were consistent with this idea of efficiency of support

that comes with the collaboration of foster parents and social workers:

Katharine explains:

"Talking to the social worker often does help me be more aware of the things I
have to do for the child to make things easier for them."

Other participants did not express an experience of the same efficiency of

communication support to the foster child, Dorothy mentions:

"I mean to be honest, I don't think it does anything. They are going do what they
want to do, and I have had foster kids even tell me that they don't care, and that
they aren't scared of us."

Foster care alumni who dropped out of school expressed that teachers didn't care

for them and had no interest in their educational success (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

Teachers of foster children must also be aware that parental engagement practices are

related to positive outcomes like increased academic performance, motivation, and social

competence (Jacobs, 2013). When parents receive frequent and effective communication

from teachers they are found to have a higher overall evaluation of the teacher as well as

a sense of comfort with the school (Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). The findings of the present

study are consistent with the previous literature on the topic of teacher-student

relationships and the positive outcomes brought on by parental engagement. Several

foster parents revealed that they were under the impression that some of the teachers of

their foster children allowed their ideals to influence the way they treated the child. Some

foster parents also revealed that, like the foster care alumni in the Davis & Dupper (2004)

study, noticed that their teacher did not care for them.

Compared to the Jacobs (2013) finding that parental engagement increases the

academic performance, motivation and social competence of foster children, the findings

of this study were consistent. Participants continually expressed that the teachers that

were easy to reach, responsive, and included the foster parent in the educational

experience were the teachers of the classes their child has the most success in,

academically and socially. Ashley talks about this with her foster child's Spanish teacher:

> "Her Spanish teacher was great, I know that because we had such a great relationship, she [foster child] was able to get an A in the class. And when she took Spanish the year before with someone else, she got a C. So yea it definitely helped her be comfortable to ask for help and try harder."

> Emily expressed a similar experience:

> "The one class he [foster child] got a good grade in last semester was the one that I talked to the teacher the most. His Math teacher was all about making sure I know what was going on. The teacher would even call me just to say he sent me an email. (Laughs) But it really did make a difference I think. I mean he got a B in the class, I was really proud."

> Finally, the findings of previous literature on the barriers of communication

encountered by key stakeholders involved in the lives of foster children were consistent

with findings of this study. Foster parents expressed a dislike of the busyness of the social

workers, feeling overlooked by them, and the teachers not taking their advice about their

own foster child. Other findings suggested that there was a need to increase the

educational communication from social workers. This was consistent with the perspective

that communicating important information across systems in wanted by foster parents

(McLean, 2011). The literature necessitated a need for more exploration of the expert

perspective of foster parents, and findings from this study offered some insight on this.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The results of this study may help to inform the practices surrounding the improvement of the educational experience of foster children. There is also an opportunity for the findings of this study to inform the successful and efficient collaboration of all adults involved in the environments surrounding foster children.

The theme of teacher-child relationship being a large influence on the educational experience of foster children should influence the programming surrounding the establishment of a positive relationship between teacher and student. This may include the addition of one-on-one time spent with the foster child to get to know them personally. Another outcome that could be used to influence practice is the finding that the more parent-teacher communication there is the better the foster child does in the educational setting. This should influence the educational policies surrounding initiation of communication and collaboration with parents on behalf of the teachers. Most of the foster parents mentioned instances where they usually initiate communication and the collaboration could be increased if there were policies around the teacher being the initiate of communication as well.

The perspective expressed by foster parents that there needs to be more effective education and communication from social workers could influence policy within the foster care system. From this view it is evident that there should be more programming geared towards the collaboration and relationship between foster parents and social workers. The literature is consistent with this finding in the suggestion for social worker and teacher joint meetings and educational workshops.

Finally the results of this study can be used to influence practices of balancing the topic of communication among key stakeholders. Several foster parents expressed that when they were talking to social workers and teachers the topic was usually some negative aspect of the child's behavior or educational experience. Participants expressed a need for more progress reports and instances of positive reinforcement of the child. This should influence the practice of social workers to balance out each negative comment or communication topic with a positive one.

Dorothy expressed this need:

"It's not like I get a praise report of things he does right. No it's usually "you need to come get him because we can't handle him" or something like that. And really it's a group of them, because one day I had to go to the school and they were all sitting around and none of them had anything good to say about him."

Implications for Research

Continuing research is necessary to understand the educational experiences of foster children and how the communication patterns for key stakeholders influences that experience. The original intent of this study was to involve all stakeholders as participants to gain a more diverse and well-rounded perspective of the communication patterns, yet limited availability and time constraints prohibited the interviewing of all stakeholders. In further research it is recommended to use this method to achieve more depth and richness of data.

There is also a need for further research from the expert lens of the foster parent. As this study has shown, the foster parent has a unique position in the foster child's life and every environment that the foster child interacts with, the foster parents interact with it as well. This includes the relationship between the foster child and their biological parents. Reunification of the child and biological parents is the ultimate goal of the foster

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care system as a whole (Jacobs, 2013). The contact the child has with their biological

parent is used to facilitate and maintain the relationship. Accordingly, there should be

further research on successful patterns of collaboration between foster parents and

biological parents as this was also a suggestion from the participants that had negative

experiences with biological parents of their foster child.

The interaction and communication patterns between the foster child and

biological parent should be the inquiry of further research to determine the best practices

surrounding the educational success for the child. Several foster parents alluded to the

detriment that was caused by interactions with the biological parents. Some also

mentioned the way the parents undermined their expectations.

Ashley explains:

"Yes, and they need to be there to help the biological parent and foster parent
relationship. Because if the biological parent is getting in the way of the foster
parent being able to do their job, there should be a social worker who you can go
to for help in mediating. Because you can't always do things like that safely, so
you need someone else there. And I hate the arguing, she always wants to argue,
and I feel like if you want to argue with me about what your daughter needs, we
completely forget about what is most important, your daughter."

This, along with other findings of "back sliding" and "withdrawal" after

communicating with biological parents should be the inquiry of further research. The

foster parents expressed the "battle" and difficulty they experience when they are

fostering children who have biological parents that are not willing to collaborate.

It is also recommended to combine quantitative measures with the qualitative

method used in this study. Further research on the impact of improvements of

communication patterns on the educational experience of foster children could include an

intervention created to improve communication efficiency. This combined research

methodology would contribute to the richness of data on the influential factors associated

with educational experiences of foster children.

Limitations

The primary issues concerning limitations of this study was the size and convenience of the sample. The sampling method of snowball sampling was used to gain the interest of three out of five of the participants. This could have created a general consensus of findings due to the participants sharing some environments. Also it is encouraged to create a larger sample for the purposes of wider application of findings.

Another limitation of the sample size is that it may not be representative of the foster parent population as a whole. Furthermore, the study was specific to those who are foster parents in the Lexington, Kentucky area. The means that while the results may be transferable to other similar contexts, there are not generalizable to them. There were also no male participants included in the study which is not representative of the foster parent population, so gender perspective is also a limitation.

Further limitation involved is the singular perspective gained from the foster parent participants. Although quality data was achieved, it would have been beneficial to include the perspectives of all stakeholders involved. This would have added to the generalizability of the present study.

Generally speaking, qualitative research has the limitation of being more focused on the perspectives of the participants as they are interpreted by the researcher (Creswell, 2013). There was serious effort put forth by the researcher to avoid and bias interpretation. Although this is true, just as you will find with any researcher, total objectivity is unattainable. To ensure the most efficiency and accuracy in the portrayal of the participant's experiences, member checking was performed with participants throughout the study.

Conclusions

The rich information gathered through the interviews in this study revealed many phenomena that are consistent with existing research findings (Pecora, 2012; McLean, 2011; Noonan, et al., 2012; Gelfer & Perkins, 2012). Some of the phenomena expressed represented a theme that was not as present in existing literature. For example, the impact of communication patterns among stakeholders were seen to have an impact on the consistency of expectations across systems, while the communication with biological parents was concurrently undermining those expectations.

Throughout the interviews, all participants were willing to reveal detailed and personal information about their experiences and seemed to be passionate about expressing their perspective on the topic. There were some similarities among the five experiences of the foster parent participants, yet all of them had unique perspectives on and experiences of the communication patterns among key stakeholders, and the educational experience of their foster children.

Each foster parent was willing to be open and honest about the positive and negative experiences they had being foster parents and collaborating with other stakeholders. For most participants the educational experience of the foster child was important to them and they could see a clear influence of the way they communicated with other stakeholders. Participants continually expressed disdain for any practices that were not improving the educational experience for their foster child. Often participants would say "and that's not right" or "why did you become a teacher if you weren't going to do the job right for everyone."

It was evident that the foster parents experienced a large influence from the biological parents of the foster child. Even though the inquiry of the interview questions did not involve the biological parents, each participant mentioned them at least once, with some participants mentioning the biological parent in almost every response. This finding is unique to this study because of the focus on the expert lens of the foster parent. Through this lens the researcher was able to uncover a phenomena experienced by foster parents that is also included in the educational experience of the foster child. This goes along with the theme of past experiences still impacting present educational experiences. Several participants mentioned the ways in which the negative environments the foster child experienced prior to foster care continuously impacted their educational experience now.

The qualitative nature of the present study created an opportunity for rich, descriptive thoughts about experiences. Further research could unpack the phenomena by continuing to focus on the perspective of the foster parent and how they suggest adults involved in the lives of foster children collaborate and create successful educational experiences for them. With implementation of more effective communication and relationship strengthening practices, the educational experiences of foster children could potentially be improved. The accounts of these five foster parents are relatable to the research literature as a whole and offer an inside look into the educational experiences of foster children and communication patterns among key stakeholders.

Appendix A
Key Terms

Foster Care: 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes (Shin, 2004)

Foster Parent: A person who serves as parent and guardian of a child in place of the biological parents without legally adopting the child. Foster parents may be related (kinship care) or unrelated to the child (Spielfogel, Leather, Christian, & McMeel, 2011)

Foster care agency workers: Includes social workers, foster agency staff, case workers, and agency administrators. (Weinberg, Zetlin, & Shea, 2009)

Teachers of children in foster care: Teachers with at least one child placed in the foster care system in their classroom on a regular basis.

Communication patterns: Method of communication (phone, email, in person meetings, notes etc.), frequency (number of communications per month), topic of communication, and perceived efficiency of communication (McLean, 2011).

Education experience: Educational success can be defined in many ways. The present study will define educational experience as, experience of classroom expectations, peer relationships experienced at school, performance on academic tasks, and behavior in all educational settings (Noonan, et al., 2012).

Appendix B

Interview Protocol and Questions

Interviewers will conduct the following steps before beginning the official interview of the participants.

1. Give each participant a copy of the participant informed consent document.
2. Read the informed consent document out loud and answer any questions the participants may have.
3. Have the participants sign the informed consent document.
4. Give participants the demographic questionnaire.
5. Tell the participants for the purpose of organization you will be audio recording the entire interview.
6. Thank the participants for participating and tell them you will now begin asking them questions about their experience as a foster parent.
7. Begin with question 1.

Interview Questions

1. In your view, what is it like for the foster children to experience a school setting?
   Probe: For example, how well does the foster child handle classroom expectations, pee relationships, and academic tasks?

2. Tell me about the communication patterns you experience with foster care agency professionals such as social workers, administrators etc.
   Probe: For example how often do you communicate, the typical form of communication   you use and your perceived quality of the communication.

3. Tell me about the communication patterns you experience with teachers of your foster child.
   Probe: For example how often do you communicate, the typical form of communication   you use and your perceived quality of the communication.

4. In your perspective, how does the way you communicate with foster care agency professionals impact the educational experience of the foster child?

5. In your perspective, how does the way you communicate with teachers impact the educational experience of the foster child?

6. What are some barriers you encounter when communicating with foster care agency workers and teachers?

7. In your opinion, what are the best ways for adults working with foster children to communicate with each other?

Appendix C

Demographics Questionnaire

The following questionnaire is to be completed prior to the interview, to give the
researcher background information pertinent to the interview. With all other
information you share, this form will be kept confidential.

1.   Date of birth?   _____/ _____/ _____

2.   What is your gender?

       Male___

       Female___

3.   What is the highest level of education you have received?

       _____

4.   How many years in total have you been a foster parent? _____

5.   How many biological children do you have? _____

6.   How many foster children do you have living with you currently? _____

Appendix D

IRB Consent

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EXEMPTION CERTIFICATION

MEMO: Teresa Hardin,
3200 Loch Ness Drive
Apt 29
Lexington, KY 40517
PI phone #: (859)257-2005

FROM: Institutional Review Board
c/o Office of Research Integrity

SUBJECT: Exemption Certification for Protocol No. 15-1085-X4B

DATE: January 14, 2016

On January 14, 2016, it was determined that your project entitled, *Educational experiences of foster children and communication patterns among key stakeholders: The foster parent perspective*, meets federal criteria to qualify as an exempt study.

Because the study has been certified as exempt, you will not be required to complete continuation or final review reports. However, it is your responsibility to notify the IRB prior to making any changes to the study. Please note that changes made to an exempt protocol may disqualify it from exempt status and may require an expedited or full review.

The Office of Research Integrity will hold your exemption application for six years. Before the end of the sixth year, you will be notified that your file will be closed and the application destroyed. If your project is still ongoing, you will need to contact the Office of Research Integrity upon receipt of that letter and follow the instructions for completing a new exemption application. It is, therefore, important that you keep your address current with the Office of Research Integrity.

For information describing investigator responsibilities after obtaining IRB approval, download and read the document "PI Guidance to Responsibilities, Qualifications, Records and Documentation of Human Subjects Research" from the Office of Research Integrity's IRB Survival Handbook web page [http://www.research.uky.edu/ori/IRB-Survival-Handbook.html#PIresponsibilities]. Additional information regarding IRB review, federal regulations, and institutional policies may be found through ORI's web site [http://www.research.uke.edu/ori]. If you have questions, need additional information, or would like a paper copy of the above mentioned document, contact the Office of Research Integrity at (859) 257-9428.

1

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Educational Experience of Foster Children and Communication Patterns of Key

Stakeholders: The Foster Parent Perspective

WHY ARE YOU BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?

You are being invited to take part in a research study about the communication patterns between foster parents, teachers of foster children, and foster care agency workers and how this impacts the educational experience of foster children. You are being invited to take part in this research study because you are a foster parent, and have been involved in a foster child's life for at least six months. If you participate in this study, you will be one of about 5-7 people to do so.

WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?

The person in charge of this study is Teresa Hardin of University of Kentucky Department of Family Sciences. She is being guided in this research by Donna R. Smith, Ph.D. There may be other people on the research team assisting at different times during the study.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

By doing this study, we hope to learn about the educational experiences of foster children. We also hope to get the perspectives of foster parents on the communication patterns they experience with other stakeholders. All of this will help us learn the best practices of collaboration that create the most positive educational experiences for foster children.

WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

The research procedures will be conducted at a predetermined location agreed upon by the investigator and the participant. You will need to come to the predetermined location 1 time during the study. This visit will take about 30-60 minutes. The total amount of time you will be asked to participate in this study is 30-60 minutes.

WHAT WILL YOU BE ASKED TO DO?

You will be asked to participate in one, in-person interview with the investigator. The location will be agreed upon by the principle investigator and the participant. The interviews will be audio recorded with the participants' consent. During the interview the investigator will ask you questions about your experience of communicating with foster agency workers and teachers of foster children. You will also be asked questions about your perception of the educational experience of the foster child you parent.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?

To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would experience in everyday life.

WILL YOU BENEFIT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

A benefit of this study is the opportunity to contribute to the knowledge of successful strategies leading to positive educations experiences of foster children. Participants will be able to provide their unique experience as a foster parent to inform best policy formation and practices surrounding foster children.

DO YOU HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?

If you decide to take part in the study, it should be because you really want to volunteer. You will not lose any benefits or rights you would normally have if you choose not to volunteer. You can stop at any time during the study and still keep the benefits and rights you had before volunteering.

IF YOU DON'T WANT TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY, ARE THERE OTHER CHOICES?
If you do not want to be in the study, there are no other choices except not to take part in the study.

WHAT WILL IT COST YOU TO PARTICIPATE?

There are no costs associated with taking part in the study.

WILL YOU RECEIVE ANY REWARDS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Participants will be compensated with $50 for completing all procedures required of the study. Participants should expect payment within two weeks post participation in the form of a check. If a participant does not complete all of the study activities the compensation will be pro-rated.

WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT YOU GIVE?

We will make every effort to keep confidential all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law.

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be personally identified in these written materials. We may publish the results of this study; however, we will keep your name and other identifying information private.

We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. The audio recordings of the interviews will be held in a locked container during transportation to the locked file. Only the primary investigator will have access to the locked file.

We will keep private all research records that identify you to the extent allowed by law. However, there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, we may be required to show information which identifies you to people who need to be sure we have done the research correctly; these would be people from such organizations as the University of Kentucky.

CAN YOUR TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?

If you decide to take part in the study you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to continue. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study. If you choose to end your participation early, the compensation will be pro-rated as follows. If you come to the interview, yet do not answer any questions you will receive $10. If you come to the interview and answer half of the interview questions, you will receive $25. If you come to the interview and answer ¾ of the interview questions you will receive $30. If you come to the interview and answer all of the interview questions you will be fully compensated with $50.

WHAT ELSE DO YOU NEED TO KNOW?

There is a possibility that the data collected from you may be shared with other investigators in the future. If that is the case the data will not contain information that can identify you unless you give your consent or the UK Institutional Review Board (IRB) approves the research. The IRB is a committee that reviews ethical issues, according to federal, state and local regulations on research with human subjects, to make sure the study complies with these before approval of a research study is issued.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, SUGGESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions, suggestions, concerns, or complaints about the study, you can contact the investigator, Teresa Hardin at 859-797-2005. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the staff in the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Kentucky between the business hours of 8am and 5pm EST, Mon-Fri. at 859-257-9428 or toll free at 1-866-400-9428. We will give you a signed copy of this consent form to take with you.

_____   _____
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study   Date

_____
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

_____   _____
Name of (authorized) person obtaining informed consent   Date

Appendix F

Summary of Participant Characteristics

Name	Gender	Age	Education Attained	# of Biological Children	# of Foster Children	Years of Foster Parent Experience
Ashley*[2]	Female	24	High School	0	3	3
Dorothy*	Female	54	High School	3	3	2
Emily*	Female	36	Bachelor of Science	0	1	4
Katherine*	Female	43	High School	3	3	4
Tawana*	Female	50	High School	2	3	3

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[2] * Pseudonym was given to protect participant's confidentiality; names used in the manuscript are not participants' real names.

Appendix G

The Codebook

Past Experiences Impacting Educational Experience	Emphasis on the experiences of the foster child that were before they came into foster care and the relation of these to present educational experience
Teacher-Student Relationships Impacting Educational Experience	Attitude about the perceived quality of relationship between foster child and teacher, and the relation of this to the present educational experience
Consistency of Expectations Sub-theme: Consistency Undermined by Biological parents	Ideas about the impact of communication patterns influencing the expectations of the foster child across systems. Sub theme included the emphasis of the influence communication with biological parents has on the consistency of other system expectations

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