Transitioning in state care: A phenomenological approach to understanding
the perceived challenges of transitions for older youth in foster care

by

Marcellis D. Washington

B.A., Washburn University, 2014
MSEd., Northwest Missouri State University, 2018

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Counseling and Student Development
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2023

**Abstract**

I explored the experiences of former foster youth (FFY) as they transition through the foster care system and navigate high school, aiming to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the lived realities of FFY during these transitions, and emphasizing the challenges they face and the support systems that may be lacking. A qualitative research approach was employed, focusing on the lived experiences of FFY. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former foster youth and service providers. Additionally, I conducted a document analysis of interagency agreements, protocols, and intervention models. Thematic analysis facilitated the data analysis, helping to discern emergent themes, patterns, and linkages inherent in the collected data. Seven primary themes emerged, highlighting the instability and uncertainty faced by transitioning foster youth. These themes underscored the systemic issues within the foster care system, the reluctance of FFY to form new relationships due to past traumas, and the importance of genuine relationships in guiding them towards positive outcomes. The results also emphasized the barriers FFY face, from disruptions in their educational trajectories to limited access to resources, and their commendable determination to succeed academically. The findings suggest a pressing need for extended care and support for FFY beyond the age of 18. Mentorship programs and support groups are recommended as they offer platforms for FFY to connect with others and reshape their identities. Additionally, there's a call for enhanced interagency collaboration to promote the welfare of youth in foster care and a focus on early intervention strategies to prevent the need for foster care placements.

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Approved by:

Major Professor
Doris Carroll, Ph.D.

# Copyright

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I explored the experiences of former foster youth (FFY) as they transition through the foster care system and navigate high school, aiming to bridge the knowledge gap regarding the lived realities of FFY during these transitions, and emphasizing the challenges they face and the support systems that may be lacking. A qualitative research approach was employed, focusing on the lived experiences of FFY. Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with former foster youth and service providers. Additionally, document analysis of interagency agreements, protocols, and intervention models was conducted. Thematic analysis facilitated the data analysis, helping to discern emergent themes, patterns, and linkages inherent in the collected data. Seven primary themes emerged, highlighting the instability and uncertainty faced by transitioning foster youth. These themes underscored the systemic issues within the foster care system, the reluctance of FFY to form new relationships due to past traumas, and the importance of genuine relationships in guiding them towards positive outcomes. The results also emphasized the barriers FFY face, from disruptions in their educational trajectories to limited access to resources, and their commendable determination to succeed academically. The findings suggest a pressing need for extended care and support for FFY beyond the age of 18. Mentorship programs and support groups are recommended as they offer platforms for FFY to connect with others and reshape their identities. Additionally, there's a call for enhanced interagency collaboration to promote the welfare of youth in foster care and a focus on early intervention strategies to prevent the need for foster care placements.

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## Acknowledgements

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**Dedication**

Denzel Deion Chilcoat, February 23, 1995–December 20, 2017

Dedicated to my loving brother, Denzel Deion Chilcoat, who passed away in December 2017. My brother had a smile that could light up a room, he had a big heart, and he was willing to do whatever it took to make you laugh or smile that day. He was a one-of-a-kind athlete, brother to eight siblings, father to one, and completely irreplaceable. His loss will be forever felt.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

Foster care programs prevent maltreatment and abuse of children in distressed families by providing a temporary home or foster care family until the children can safely return to their homes or a permanent home is found (Almquist & Brännström, 2019; Jawed et al., 2023; Scannapieco et al., 2020). Congress identified courts with jurisdiction over families and children to ensure reasonable efforts to help sustain or repair families or to place children in foster care when necessary (Borchet et al., 2019; Montserrat et al., 2022). Children can be placed in state custody if they are at risk of harm or if their parents cannot provide a safe and stable home environment (Almquist & Brännström, 2019; Jawed et al., 2023). According to the Administration for Children and Families, there were approximately 424,000 children in foster care in the United States in 2019, with over 20,000 youth aging out of the system without a permanent family placement (Courtney et al., 2013; Negrão et al., 2022; Patterson et al., 2015).

Foster youth transition through foster care is a complex and challenging process (Powers et al., 2018). As youth age out of the foster care system and transition into adulthood, they face numerous difficulties and barriers that hinder their successful social integration. Adolescents in the foster care system undergo periodic transitions during their later years, which affect their development and well-being (Schiller, 2015; Tam, 2018). The nature of transitions encompasses a spectrum of changes that older youth experience while in foster care, such as shifts in placements, educational environments, and support structures. The effects of transitions on adolescents can be significant, impacting their emotional, psychological, and social adjustment (Du et al., 2018; Reskiana et al., 2022; Shrestha et al., 2021). Transitions that older youth encounter encompass several distinct types, each contributing to their journey within the system.

One crucial type of transition for older youth in foster care is the transition from foster care to independence. This transition, often referred to as aging out, occurs when a youth reaches the age of majority and emancipates from foster care without being reunited with family or finding permanent placement (Lemus et al., 2017). The transition is particularly challenging for foster youth, as they must navigate the complexities of adulthood without the support and stability that a permanent family provides. An approach that can deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by older youth in foster care during their transition to independence is phenomenological (Patterson et al., 2015; Schiller, 2015). A phenomenological approach to understanding the challenges of transitions for older youth in foster care involves examining their subjective experiences and perceptions of the transition process (Kraun et al., 2023). By adopting a phenomenological approach, I hope to gain insight into the lived experiences of older youth in foster care and understand the unique challenges they face during their transition to independence.

## Background of the Problem

### Introduction to Foster Care System

The foster care system is a complex sociotechnical system involving diverse actors and interests regarding an incredibly vulnerable population. The foster care system aims to provide temporary care and support for children and adolescents who cannot live with their biological families due to various challenges such as abuse, neglect, or parental incarceration (Smales et al., 2021). Although the foster care system exists to protect and support children and adolescents, studies have shown that youth in foster care often face significant challenges and obstacles while transitioning through foster care and adulthood (Alarcón et al., 2021; Courtney et al., 2013; MacCarthy et al., 2018). Transitions are critical periods in a person's life, and they can be

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incredibly challenging for youth in foster care (Roche et al., 2015). These challenges can have long-lasting effects on their overall well-being and future prospects (Ali, 2021). Children in foster care are almost always survivors of trauma, and those who exit the program into adulthood are at high risk of adverse outcomes such as homelessness (Bald et al., 2022; Stewart, 2022). High percentages of foster youth have reported extremely long periods of placement, homelessness upon transition out of foster care, or a first experience of homelessness while still in foster care (González-García et al., 2017; Roche et al., 2015; Trapenciere, 2018). In hopes of improving these outcomes, legislative pressure calls for providers to use technological interventions that are data-informed and evidence-based treatments (Kaku et al., 2022; Lo et al., 2020).

Historically, children in foster care have faced significant challenges and obstacles when transitioning to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2015; Seker et al., 2022). A systematic review of 13 studies conducted by Bass et al. revealed that aging out of foster care can result in challenges for youth and young adults as they face a lack of resources for stable housing, education, and employment, which disrupts their ability to live independently. Additionally, studies focusing on foster youth who reach the age of majority during their time in the foster care system suggest that these young individuals encounter tremendous hurdles in becoming self-sufficient (Agbo, 2021; Courtney et al., 2013). Studies of foster youth who reach the age of majority during foster care suggest that these youth face enormous challenges to becoming self-sufficient, including undereducation, unemployment, and homelessness, as well as high rates of poverty, incarceration, and revictimization (Courtney et al., 2013; Lotty et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2015). These high rates of troubling outcomes at the onset of transition to adulthood indicate the need for a closer examination of the experiences of youth during their time in foster

care and the services provided to prepare them for transitions and the transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013; Trapenciere, 2018).

Previous researchers have established the amount of time spent in placement and experiences of transition out of foster care, as well as the impact of institutionalization, connectivity with positive, supportive adults, and racial disparities, especially for foster youth of color, impact outcomes for foster youth (Bald et al., 2022; Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; González-García et al., 2017). In addition to these broader challenges, specific challenges associated with transitions for foster youth further compound their difficulties. Transitions in the foster care system can fall into three main categories: educational transitions, social transitions, and placement transitions (Roche et al., 2015). Education is a crucial aspect of a young person's development and plays a significant role in their future opportunities and success (Sarwono et al., 2020). Social transitions involve changes in social connections and support systems, which can be particularly challenging for foster youth who may have experienced multiple disruptions and instabilities in their relationships (Gale, 2021). And lastly, placement transitions refer to changes in living arrangements, such as moving to a new foster home or transitioning to independent living (Cronin, 2019; Heerde et al., 2016; Roche et al., 2015).

While there has been a plethora of research relating to foster youth support systems, transitioning out of care, foster youth LGBTQI+ supports, and foster youth being an at-risk population in general, there has been little research relating to the intricacies of transitioning while in care and how profound its impact can be if done poorly (González-García et al., 2017; Ossorio & Carvalho, 2019). Studies have shown that placement instability in the foster care system, including multiple placements, can lead to poor health outcomes for foster youth

(Cronin, 2019; Kim et al., 2022; Midgley et al., 2021; Moussavi et al., 2021; Rose & Lanier, 2017).

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services data from 2012–2021, foster care and adoption trends have shown variability. These figures encompass children who have exited or entered care, those who were adopted or waiting for adoption, and those currently receiving services within the system. The data presented in Figure 1 and other sections of this document are based on information provided by states and the District of Columbia to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System until 28 June 2022. Data for Puerto Rico exists only for 2018–2021 because of ongoing concerns about data quality resulting from Hurricane Maria. Efforts are currently underway in Puerto Rico to address these issues and improve the quality of their data (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2022). Youth placed in foster care often report experiencing adverse side effects during transitions between environments, such as changing schools, homes, and friendships. The volatility and insecurity of placement in adverse environments significantly impact the foster care children's well-being (Rubin et al., 2007).

**Figure 1**

*Trends in Foster Care and Adoption: Fiscal Year (FY) 2012–2021*
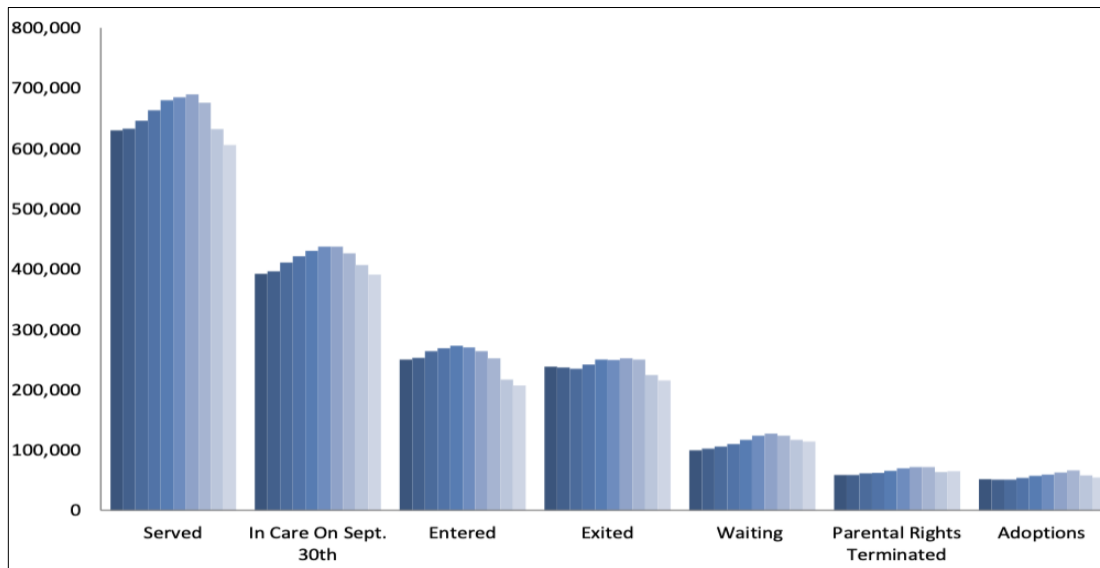


**U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2022 Foster Care Details and Data Numbers of Children in Foster Care**

In the last 10 years, from FY 2012–FY 2021, there was a notable increase in the number of children in foster care. The numbers rose from a low of 392,000 in FY 2012 to a peak of 437,000 in FY 2017 and remained constant at that level for FY 2018. However, since then, there has been a decrease in the number of children in care. Compared to the peak figure of 437,000, a decrease of approximately 2.5% or 11,000 during FY 2019, followed by an even more significant decline of around 4.5% between FY 2020 and a substantial drop compared with the previous fiscal year. This downward trend has continued into -21, as evidenced by a further 3.9% reduction compared to data related to the preceding fiscal year, 2020.

*Entries into and Exits from Foster Care*

The number of children entering foster care reached its lowest level in FY 2012, with 250,000 entries. Entries into care peaked at 273,000 in FY 2016 and decreased to 252,000 by FY 2019. In FY 2021, the number of entries further declined to a new low of 207,000 since data collection began over 2 decades ago. The number of exits fluctuated between 235. Exits from foster care during FY 2021 experienced a decrease of 4 percent compared to FY 2020. This decline represents a significant reduction of 14% compared to FY 2019 and marks the lowest number of exits since the inception of AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System) data collection over 2 decades ago. Changes in entries into foster care can affect the number of exits, which has likely been a contributing factor over the past 3 years.

*Children Waiting to be Adopted*

The number of children waiting to be adopted is a subset of those in foster care on the last day; this includes children with a goal of adoption and whose parents have their parental rights terminated. As the number of children in foster care declined, so did the number of children waiting for adoption. However, when there was an increase in the year-end count of children in foster care from FY 2013–FY 2017 (peaking at 437,000), there was also an increase in the number waiting for adoption, reaching 127,000 by FY 2018. The number then slightly decreased to 124,000 in FY 2019 and to 117,000 in FY 2020. In FY 2021, the waiting count slightly dropped again to 114,000. The percentage of children classified as waiting for adoption has remained relatively consistent over the past decade. On average, 26%–29% of children in care are waiting on the last day, a percent range virtually unchanged at around 29% for the last 4 years (FYs: 2018-2021).

### *Children Waiting to be Adopted Whose Parents' Rights Were Terminated*

The subset of waiting children has experienced fluctuations in the percentage of those awaiting adoption from parents with terminated parental rights. The overall population of children waiting to be adopted has grown since FY 2012, resulting in an annual increase in the absolute number of children with terminated parental rights. From FY 2012–FY 2019, the number increased from 58,400 to 71,900. However, a decrease was observed in FY 2020 when the number fell to 63,800, representing approximately 54.5% of all waiting children, the lowest percentage recorded between 2012 and 2021. In contrast, a slight increase occurred for FY2021, with legally free waiting children reaching approximately 65,000, or around 57% of the waiting children category.

### *Children Adopted*

The number of adoptions finalized each year remained relatively consistent from FY 2012 to FY 2015. However, there was a significant increase in adoptions, with 57,200 in FY 2016, representing a nearly 10.5% rise compared to the average of 51,800 during the previous 4 fiscal years. The highest recorded number of adoptions occurred in FY 2019 at a total of 66,200. Throughout FYs 2012 to 2015, adoptions accounted for an average of around 21.7% of all foster care discharges per year, and this percentage remained stable. In FY 2020, there was a decrease of 13% in adoptions compared to the previous year. However, these adoptions accounted for 26% of all discharges in that fiscal year. Similarly, in FY 2021, there was a further decline, with 54,200 adoptions representing more than a 6% decrease from FY 2020 and over an 18% decrease from the historic high of 66,200 adoptions in FY 2019. These figures make up about one-fourth (25%) of all discharges in FY 2021.

Transitioning out of foster care successfully can become significantly more challenging when previous transitions resulted in barriers that negatively affect one's success in an educational setting, personal relationships or when the child experienced inconsistent support (Patterson et al., 2015; Roche et al., 2015; Schiller, 2015). In addition to the inherent difficulties of transitioning to adulthood, such as establishing financial independence and finding stable housing and employment opportunities, older youth in foster care also face unique challenges that stem from their experiences within the foster care system (Schiller, 2015). State legislators and stakeholders involved with decision-making for foster youth could benefit from hearing first-hand accounts of the challenges and obstacles older youth face during their transition to independence; this is where the phenomenological approach becomes valuable.

### *Foster Youth Demographics*

Before delving into the phenomenological approach to understanding the challenges of transitions for older youth in foster care, it is essential to provide some demographics of this population. According to the DHHS, older youth in foster care refers to those approaching or have reached the age of majority (typically 18–21, depending on the state) and are transitioning out of the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Older youth in foster care constitute a significant portion of the overall foster care population. In 2015, approximately 19% of children and youth who exited foster care reached ages 16–19 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Moreover, nearly half of these youth left care through aging out or running away (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). These statistics highlight the pressing need to understand and address the challenges faced by older youth in foster care during their transition to adulthood (Powers et al., 2018).

The foster care program intends to provide a safe and nurturing environment for children

and youth who have experienced abuse, neglect, or other circumstances that prevent them from

living with their biological families (Gómez et al., 2020). However, the foster care system is not

without its shortcomings. The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System (AFCARS),

along with other past research, found that older youth in foster care face numerous challenges as

they transition to adulthood, including low educational attainment, limited vocational

opportunities, housing instability, and increased risk of poverty, incarceration, and

revictimization (Lee & Cuellar, 2019; Wong et al., 2022). Foster care data shows that these

challenges persist even after youth have aged out of the system (U.S. Department of Health and

Human Services, 2021).

The primary goal for older foster youth transitioning into care or a new environment is to

achieve self-sufficiency and independence. Conversations surrounding placement and sibling

placement should be conducted with the youth to ensure their preferences and needs receive

consideration. Additionally, it is essential to address the unique needs and challenges older youth

face in foster care, such as mental health problems, limited access to permanent connections and

support, and the impact of past trauma (Agbo, 2021; Larrieta et al., 2022). When youth feel like

their voices go unheard or their needs go unmet, those circumstances can hinder their transition

process and increase the likelihood of adverse outcomes (Imrovič et al., 2022; Phelps, 2017). The

foster care system in America today has made significant efforts to support older youth in their

transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013). However, there is still a long way to go in

providing comprehensive and effective services that prepare youth for independent living and

success (Edwards et al., 2016; Gaspar, 2018; Walaszczyk & Belina, 2019). Current data

surrounding older youth in foster care in America today suggest that there is a pressing need for

a phenomenological approach to understanding the challenges they face during their transition to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013). .

**Foster Youth and Transitions**

*School Transitions*

Foster care children's ability to care for themselves improves among those in their high school years (Courtney et al., 2013; Maresova et al., 2019). This assumption relies on the secondary belief that these individuals do not have significant cognitive disabilities, mental health disorders, or noticeable physical impairments (Agbo, 2021). The underlying premise finds footing in the belief that foster children, like their counterparts, possess the potential for resilience and positive development, contingent upon attaining stable and high-quality placements, cultivating wholesome relationships, and having their physiological, social, and psychological needs adequately addressed (Zlotnick et al., 2016). Comparable to their non-foster peers, the consistency and dependability of their environment exert substantial influence over the extent of their academic accomplishments (Günal & Demirtaşli, 2016; Krupa & Walczak, 2021; Marinaci et al., 2021).

A stable environment and sustained association with a singular educational institution substantially facilitate academic attainment among foster youth (Zlotnick et al., 2016). Foster youth stand to gain by expanding their engagement within their high school groups and programs, amplifying the prospects for constructive interactions with educators and a promising transition to adulthood by encountering fewer disruptions and transitions. The attainment of foundational high school education, a fundamental aspect of positive youth development and an intrinsic facet of adolescent expectations, is pivotal (Mehta & Fine, 2019). Reducing educational obstacles and shifts in foster home arrangements would likely yield more opportunities for

establishing and nurturing peer and educator relationships, coupled with heightened sensitivity to educational advancement.

### *Home Transitions*

Each state in the United States has a dedicated department specifically established to support and safeguard children and families by evaluating any safety issues or risk elements to accurately assess whether external services are required (Birken et al., 2017; Eposti et al., 2019; Wong et al., 2022). However, despite the efforts of these departments, transitioning from one foster home to another can still pose significant challenges for older youth in foster care. Transitioning between foster homes for older youth in foster care can be particularly difficult due to the instability and unpredictability of their living arrangements. The frequent changes in foster care placements can result in instability and disrupt the sense of safety and security that older youth in foster care need to thrive (Collins et al., 2020; Moussavi et al., 2021).

The types of transitions in foster care include moves to a new foster home, changes in caregivers, and transfers between residential facilities (Lindmark et al., 2019; Ruyter, 2014; Shin et al., 2020). When older adolescents in foster care undergo multiple transitions between different placements, they may encounter challenges in establishing meaningful bonds with their caregivers and peers (Kim et al., 2022; Moussavi et al., 2021; Petersen et al., 2018; Seker et al., 2022). Consequently, forming a sense of trust and connection becomes arduous for them. These transitions often occur due to a variety of factors such as the availability of foster homes, conflicts with caregivers, or changes in the needs and circumstances of the foster youth (Brown et al., 2019). The challenges associated with these home transitions can harm the relationships of older youth in foster care (Agbo, 2021; Moussavi et al., 2021). Ensuring a stable residence is crucial for older adolescents who are in the foster care system as it offers them a feeling of

belonging, steadiness, and predictability in their daily lives (Gale, 2021; Kim et al., 2022; Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014).

### *Relationship Transitions*

Older foster youth experience transitions in their living arrangements and relationships (Chammem et al., 2021; Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014; Scannapieco et al., 2020). They may form attachments to caregivers, social workers, and other individuals, only to have those relationships disrupted and replaced by new ones (Moussavi et al., 2021; Petersen et al., 2018). These relationship transitions can be particularly challenging for older youth in foster care as they may have experienced multiple disruptions in their lives, including the loss of their biological parents (Collins et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). The disruption of relationships with significant adults in the lives of older youth in foster care can have significant consequences, leading to feelings of abandonment, trust issues, and difficulties in forming new attachments (Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014; Moussavi et al., 2021).

Research has shown that maintaining stable and supportive relationships is crucial for foster youth, especially as they transition out of foster care (Brown et al., 2019; Gale, 2021; Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014). Stable relationships can provide older youth in foster care with a sense of continuity and support, helping them navigate the challenges of transitioning to adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013; Nichter et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the frequent transitions in foster care placements can hinder the development and maintenance of stable relationships for older youth in foster care (Kim et al., 2022; Moussavi et al., 2021). These transitions can disrupt their social networks and make it challenging to establish long-lasting and meaningful connections with supportive adults (Collins et al., 2020; Silva et al., 2021). With consistent and nurturing relationships with adults, older youth in foster care may be able to develop the

necessary skills and resources to transition into adulthood successfully (Gale, 2021). Older youth in foster care face numerous challenges during transitions, often compounded by the lack of stable and supportive relationships with adults (Courtney et al., 2013; Gale, 2021; Seker et al., 2022).

Transitioning older foster youth should be trained in cultural competence and diversity to ensure that they are prepared to navigate the complexities of the world they will encounter outside of the foster care system (Courtney et al., 2013; Scannapieco et al., 2020; Yaroshenko & Semigina, 2023). Furthermore, providing comprehensive support services to older youth in foster care can help mitigate the challenges they face during transitions. These support services include educational support, mental health services, life skills training, and assistance finding stable housing and employment (Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020; Gale, 2021; Kim et al., 2022). Lastly, learning to form healthy relationships for older youth in foster care is a vital aspect of their transition into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2013; Ergüner-Tekinalp & Crabtree-Groff, 2014; Gale, 2021). By providing them with guidance and support in forming healthy relationships, we can help them develop the social and emotional skills necessary to build and maintain positive connections with adults and peers (Davison et al., 2015; Duby et al., 2022; Mézerville, 2019; Vetter et al., 2010; Zulkifli et al., 2021).

## Statement of the Problem

The problem is the intricate and often challenging experiences former foster youth (FFY) face as they navigate the foster care system's transitions, including how they negotiate with the high school environment during their time in foster care. Despite substantial research into the relationship between foster youths' placement attributes and overall youth well-being, a considerable gap still exist in comprehending the lived realities of FFY during these transitions

(Armstrong-Heimsoth et al., 2020; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). Family placements involving kin caregivers and sibling arrangements are consistently associated with positive outcomes, including improved mental health, academic performance, and placement stability, among other benefits (Navaneetham & Kanth, 2022). However, as most young adults lack the skills and confidence to achieve self-sufficiency by age 18, there is a substantial gap in support for FFY during the crucial transition into independent adulthood (Chanen et al., 2020). Jones (2019) suggested that self-sufficiency is often only achieved in the mid-20s, emphasizing the need for extended care and support until age 25. Unfortunately, many FFY aging out of the system lack such support, resulting in an increased risk of unemployment, lower educational attainment, and substance misuse (Černý et al., 2018; Ganapathy et al., 2022; Poudel & Gautam, 2017; Vaalavuo et al., 2022). Studying the experiences of FFY who experienced transitions while in foster care may help researchers and practitioners better understand how to address support system gaps and failures.

Support gaps raise critical questions about the experiences of FFY as they move through foster care transitions and navigate their educational journey, particularly within high school environments. The intersection of foster care transitions and educational experiences underscores a complex and multifaceted challenge, impacting these young individuals' immediate well-being and long-term prospects (Khan, 2021; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). The transition from foster home to foster home disrupts their living arrangements and presents formidable obstacles to maintaining continuity in their education (Arri et al., 2019). Furthermore, the abrupt shift from familiar school settings to new ones can exacerbate feelings of instability and hinder academic progress, challenges compounded by the absence of comprehensive and sustained support structures beyond 18 (Teyhan et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2021). The interplay between foster care

transitions and the high school environment is a pressing concern requiring careful examination. Former foster youths' experiences during transition periods demand further exploration to comprehend the factors contributing to their well-being and educational outcomes (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). In addressing this problem, I aim to elucidate the lived experiences of FFY, aiming to inform policy, practice, and interventions that better support these young individuals as they navigate the pathways of foster care and education.

## Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study.

RQ1) How did former foster youth describe their experiences with foster home transitions?

RQ2) How did former foster youth describe the navigation of high school while transitioning to new homes?

## Rationale for Study

The rationale for this phenomenological study is grounded in the need to understand the challenges faced by older youth in foster care as they transition to adulthood. Studies have consistently shown that older youth who age out of foster care face significant difficulties in becoming self-sufficient and achieving positive life outcomes (Agbo, 2021; Courtney et al., 2013; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). These challenges include limited education opportunities, high rates of unemployment, homelessness, poverty, incarceration, and revictimization (Evans-Chase, 2015; Green et al., 2016). These troubling outcomes underscore the need to examine the experiences of youth in foster care and evaluate the effectiveness of the services provided to prepare them for the transition to adulthood.

Additionally, research has shown that youth in foster care have disparate educational outcomes compared to their peers (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). They are more likely to experience disruptions in their education due to frequent placements in different foster homes, leading to instability and hindering academic progress. These disruptions, coupled with the absence of comprehensive support systems beyond 18, can exacerbate the challenges older youth face in foster care regarding their education (Apedaile et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2021). For example, many youths in foster care may lack the necessary academic preparation for postsecondary education due to attending low-performing schools, being placed in basic education programs, or experiencing trauma and instability that hinders their educational progress (Apedaile et al., 2022; Harvey et al., 2021; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019).

In this study, I intended to address the gap in research on effective models and interventions for improving the transition trajectories of youth exiting foster care. A phenomenological approach was employed to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by older youth in foster care during their transition through the foster care system and their educational experiences to address this gap. Using interviews with former foster youth, I gathered valuable insights into the barriers these youth face and the strategies and supports they perceive as effective in enhancing their educational experiences (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020).

## Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform policy and practice surrounding the transition of older youth in foster care. By exploring the challenges and effective strategies for enhancing educational and transitioning experiences, this study can provide valuable insights into the needs of foster youth and inform the development of targeted interventions and support systems (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Understanding the challenges

older youth face in foster care and identifying effective strategies to support their educational experiences can contribute to improved outcomes for these youth (Fox et al., 2020; King et al., 2022; Yuanyuan et al., 2022). The findings from this study may contribute to the existing literature on transitions for older youth in foster care and inform policymakers and service providers on the necessary improvements needed to support the successful transition of youth from foster care to adulthood. Possible stakeholders invested in this study encompass a broad spectrum of individuals and organizations, including but not limited to policymakers, educators, social workers, agencies involved in foster care services, and professionals within child welfare and educational systems.

## Operational Definitions

I used the following special terms and phrases in the study:

**Barriers:** Barriers are the obstacles or difficulties that hinder foster youth from having successful educational experiences, such as frequent school changes, lack of academic support, low educational expectations, institutional discrimination, and inadequate access to resources and services (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020).

**Challenges:** Challenges are the difficulties, hardships, or negative experiences encountered by foster youth during their transition from foster care to adulthood, particularly about their experiences with transition (Cudjoe et al., 2020; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019).

**Educational experiences**: Educational experiences are the interactions, challenges, and supports related to the pursuit of education, including but not limited to attending school, receiving academic instruction, participating in extracurricular activities, and accessing educational resources and support services (Chaney et al., 2020).

**Foster care:** Foster care is the system of providing temporary care for children who are unable to live with their biological parents due to various reasons, such as abuse or neglect (Freisthler et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2022).

**Older youth in foster care:** Older youth in foster care are adolescents and young adults who are currently or have been in foster care and are nearing or have reached the age of 18 years (Apedaile et al., 2022).

**Phenomenological design:** The phenomenological design is a qualitative research approach that helps researchers understand individuals' lived experiences and perspectives, focusing on the meanings they ascribe to their experiences (Chinyamurindi & Dlaza, 2018).

**Transition**: Transition is the process of moving from one stage of life to another, particularly in the context of moving from foster care to adulthood (Cudjoe et al., 2020).

## Summary

In Chapter 1, I examined the difficulties encountered by adolescents in foster care as they transition into adulthood. The focus is primarily on the challenges related to transitioning while in foster care and education. Previous research has highlighted the significant challenges older youth face in foster care as they navigate the foster care and schooling systems. Adam-Pope and Stedman (2014) discovered that young adults transitioning out of foster care face various challenges as they navigate adulthood. These challenges include mental health issues, criminal activity involvement, and difficulty establishing independence. A lack of stability in their home and school environments further hinders foster children's development and transition into adulthood. As adulthood approaches, many foster youths encounter numerous barriers and obstacles that impede their educational experiences. These barriers include frequent school changes, low educational expectations, discrimination, and limited access to resources and

support services. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the educational and transitionary challenges faced by youth in foster care, with a specific focus on the phenomenological approach. A literature review will explore the existing research on the barriers to transitioning in foster care and strategies for successful school experiences for foster youth while also analyzing the perspectives of teachers, foster parents, and foster care alums.

# Chapter 2 Literature Review

I present Chapter 2 in 4 sections. The first section introduces the foster care system in the United States. The second section examines and discusses past and relevant research closely associated with the study. The third section discusses Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory and its relation to the study. The final section discusses the stigmas, challenges, and policies associated with transitioning through foster care.

## Review of the Literature

### Identifying Challenges in the Transition of Foster Care

Research has identified several challenges associated with the transition of foster youth (Garvey et al., 2013; Roche et al., 2015; Willis et al., 2017). One of the significant challenges is the length of time spent foster youth spend in their placement. High percentages of foster youth have reported extremely short periods of placement, which can significantly negatively affect their development and well-being (Teixeira et al., 2022). Much like all youth, foster youth would benefit from developing strong bonds and connections with their caretakers (Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; Miconi et al., 2022; Sumner et al., 2018). However, the unstable nature of foster care can lead to frequent changes in placements, disrupting these critical relationships and hindering the development of a stable support system (Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Teixeira et al., 2022; Trapenciere, 2018).

### *Emotional Impact of Transition on Foster Youth*

The lack of stability and consistent support during the transition can contribute to heightened anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges among foster youth (Seker et al., 2022). Expectant and parenting youth face additional challenges when transitioning from placement to placement and foster care to adulthood (Roche et al., 2015; Uffner et al., 2020).

Challenges are compounded by the stresses and demands of ensuing adulthood, making it even more difficult for them to navigate the transition successfully and achieve positive outcomes (Chawłowska et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2015). Feeling cared for and valued is often more important for emotional connection than when placed in one particular placement. Youth in foster care frequently emphasize that an authentic emotional connection and feeling loved, comfortable, and secure are more important than legal permanency (Ball et al., 2021).

Emotional connections for adolescent youth are crucial during the transition from foster care to adulthood. Research suggests that the unstable nature of foster care and frequent changes in placements hinder the development of stable emotional connections for adolescent youth during their transition from foster care to adulthood (Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; Miconi et al., 2022; Trapenciere, 2018). These challenges can negatively affect foster youth's emotional well-being and overall development as they navigate the transition through foster care. A lack of consistent emotional support can lead to difficulties in forming and maintaining healthy relationships with peers and adults outside the foster care system (Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Seker et al., 2022).

### Stigma and Foster Youth

A particularly challenging aspect of the transition for foster youth is the stigma they often face, which can significantly impact their transition experience (Roche et al., 2015; Sheikhan et al., 2023; Uffner et al., 2020) and lead to social isolation, discrimination, and limited opportunities for education and employment (Karanikola et al., 2018; Sutomo & Marchira, 2018; Vaiphei & Sisodia, 2019; Wan Mohd Yunus et al., 2022). Researchers have suggested that the stigma associated with foster youth may also contribute to their increased risk of homelessness, as landlords and housing providers may be hesitant to rent to them due to negative stereotypes

and assumptions (Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; Iwundu et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2015; Thulien et al., 2019). Stigmas and discrimination can further exacerbate the challenges that foster youth face during their transition period, making it even more difficult to overcome barriers and achieve success in their educational and professional pursuits (Boekel et al., 2015; Ream et al., 2012).

### The Depth and Breadth of Stigma

Youth in foster care often face stigmatization due to the negative public perceptions and stereotypes surrounding foster care. These perceptions include beliefs that foster youth are troubled or delinquent individuals, which can contribute to the marginalization and exclusion of foster youth from various social opportunities and resources (Roche et al., 2015; Sheikhan et al., 2023; Uffner et al., 2020). This stigmatization creates a sense of otherness and can result in foster youth feeling isolated and disconnected from their peers (Seker et al., 2022).

The stigma surrounding foster youth is widespread and deeply ingrained in society. It is evident in the language used to describe foster youth, such as terms like "troubled" or "at-risk," which perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about their character and abilities. This stigma often leads to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards foster youth, resulting in limited access to resources and opportunities that are essential for their successful transition to adulthood (Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2015; Uffner et al., 2020). Moreover, foster youth are often labeled as "broken" or "damaged," which can further contribute to feelings of low self-worth and a lack of belonging (Seker et al., 2022; Vaiphei & Sisodia, 2019).

### Consequences of Stigma on Foster Youth's Lives

The consequences of negative stigma on the lives of foster youth are far-reaching and can have significant implications for their overall well-being and future outcomes. Youth in the

foster care system may face various challenges because of the stigma they encounter (Fraser et al., 2019). One such challenge is the increased risk of experiencing sexual abuse within the foster care system, as there may be a lack of adequate protection and support for LGBTQI+ foster youth. Increased risk of sexual abuse can harm children's mental health and further contribute to substance abuse issues (Hébert et al., 2019; Kiwling et al., 2011). Another consequence of stigma is the potential impact on postsecondary outcomes for foster youth. The stigma experienced by foster youth may create a stereotype threat: the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about their abilities and potential.

Negative stereotypes and perceptions of foster youth as "troubled" or "problematic" can be found in various spheres, including schools, workplaces, and the public (Karanikola et al., 2018; Sutomo & Marchira, 2018; Vaiphei & Sisodia, 2019; Wan Mohd Yunus et al., 2022). Stigma for foster youth can be manifested in various ways, including negative stereotypes, misconceptions, and prejudices held by individuals and institutions (Anderson et al., 2014; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Seker et al., 2022). This stigma often leads to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors towards foster youth, resulting in limited access to resources and opportunities that are essential for their successful transition to adulthood (Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2015; Uffner et al., 2020). Other consequences of negative stigma toward foster youth include social isolation, low self-esteem, and internalized feelings of shame and worthlessness (Boekel et al., 2015; Karanikola et al., 2018; Ream et al., 2012).

### Stigma's Role in Housing and Homelessness

Stigma plays a significant role in foster youth's housing and homelessness experiences. Foster youth often face challenges in finding stable housing due to the stigma attached to their status as former foster children. Public stigma related to foster care can contribute to a shortage

of available foster homes, as potential caregivers may be reluctant to invite a foster child into their homes due to the negative stereotypes and misconceptions associated with foster youth (Boekel et al., 2015; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Rogers et al., 2016). Additionally, foster youth who age out of the system and transition into independent living often face difficulty securing stable housing. Foster youths' struggles link to the stigma surrounding foster youth, which may lead to discrimination from landlords and a lack of support in navigating the housing market (Boekel et al., 2015; Uffner et al., 2020). Furthermore, stigma can perpetuate a cycle of discrimination and marginalization, leading to higher rates of homelessness among foster youth. Research literature suggests that stigma and negative stereotypes are significant barriers to finding stable housing for foster youth.

Several studies have highlighted the role of stigma in perpetuating housing and homelessness challenges for foster youth (Boekel et al., 2015; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Public stigma towards foster care and negative stereotypes of foster youth contribute to their challenges in obtaining safe and stable housing (Buchanan, 1995; Blythe et al., 2012). Lastly, the stigma of multiple moves and disruptions in foster care placements further exacerbates the challenge of finding stable housing for foster youth (McDowall et al., 2016; Courtney et al., 2011). The frequent movement and changes in living situations experienced by foster youth can perpetuate foster care stigma and hinder their ability to establish a sense of normalcy and belonging. Lastly, this cycle of homelessness only reinforces the stigma and negative perceptions associated with foster youth as it manifests their challenges.

### *Social Media Impact on Foster Youth*

Academic research also emphasizes the significance of offering assistance and guidance to children in foster care during their period of transition to assist them with overcoming the

various obstacles they encounter (Alarcón et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2015; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Researchers have also shown that social media use is prevalent among adolescents and can positively and negatively affect mental health (Agbo, 2021). Specifically, social media use links to increased depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem in adolescents (Agbo, 2021). Given the prevalence of social media use among foster youth, it is crucial to consider the potential impact of social media on their transition experience (Sage & Sage, 2016). Research on social media use among foster youth is limited, but existing studies suggest that social media can both help and hinder their transition experience (Agbo, 2021; Atusingwize et al., 2022; Bickham et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Savoia et al., 2021).

### *Detrimental Effects of Social Media on Adolescents*

One of the challenges associated with transitions for foster youth is the potential negative consequences of social media use. Limited research on the impact of social media use, specifically among foster youth, indicates that they may be more susceptible to negative online experiences than the general population (Atusingwize et al., 2022; Sage & Sage, 2016). Using social media by foster youth can lead to increased alertness and adverse outcomes, such as connecting with potential sexual partners, falling victim to online deception (catfishing), and losing personal privacy (Sage & Sage, 2016). Additionally, foster youth may be more vulnerable to in-person partner victimization and having their texts shared publicly (Atusingwize et al., 2022; Sage & Sage, 2016). These challenges highlight the need for foster youth to navigate the online world cautiously and for caregivers, social workers, and other support systems to provide guidance and monitoring to help them safely navigate social media platforms and prevent potential harm to their well-being.

Another challenge associated with the detrimental effects of social media on foster youth's transition is the potential impact on their mental health. Research has shown that social media use among adolescents is associated with various adverse effects on their mental health, including increased levels of depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Agbo, 2021; Bickham et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Savoia et al., 2021). Adverse effects occur for foster youth who may already be dealing with trauma and other challenges associated with their placement in the foster care system. Furthermore, the use of social media may exacerbate feelings of social isolation and disconnection for foster youth during their transition period. Social isolation connects to the potential for social media to create unrealistic comparisons and expectations, leading to dissatisfaction with one's own life or body image (Agbo, 2021; Bickham et al., 2021; Craig et al., 2021; Savoia et al., 2021).

Additionally, the prevalence of cyberbullying on social media platforms poses a significant challenge for foster youth during their transition. Children in foster care are at a heightened risk of experiencing cyberbullying, which can have long-term psychological consequences. Cyberbullying can lead to reduced self-esteem, increased emotional loneliness, and difficulties developing and maintaining healthy attachments for foster youth (Atusingwize et al., 2022; Sage & Sage, 2016). Challenges can further compound the already vulnerable state of foster youth, as they may miss out on the protective benefits of positive school experiences and relationships. Therefore, it is crucial for caregivers and support systems to address these challenges by providing foster youth with education and guidance on how to navigate social media safely and effectively, as well as implementing strict regulations and monitoring to prevent cyberbullying and other harmful online experiences.

*Positive Effects of Social Media on Adolescents*

While the focus of this literature review has primarily been on the challenges and negative consequences of social media use for foster youth during their transition, it is essential to acknowledge that there are also potential positive effects of social media on adolescents in general, including foster youth. Some studies have highlighted the potential for online communication and social media to enable foster youth to maintain existing social capital and networks despite changes in foster care placement, communities, and schools (Clark et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2018; Yu et al., 2020). However, it is essential to approach these potential positive effects with caution and consider foster youth's unique circumstances and vulnerabilities.

*Support Mechanisms for Foster Youth in the Digital Age*

Support mechanisms are crucial in helping foster youth navigate the challenges of transitions and social media use in the digital age. Foster youth need guidance and education on using social media safely and responsibly. Caregivers, social workers, and other support systems can play a vital role in providing this education and guidance. Moreover, strict regulations and monitoring should be implemented to protect foster youth from potential online predators and cyberbullying (Ostendorf et al., 2020). Also, fostering positive school experiences and relationships can mitigate some negative consequences of social media use for foster youth (Wu et al., 2023).

Caregivers and support systems should prioritize providing foster youth access to educational resources and platforms that can help them develop digital literacy skills and promote positive online behaviors (Krstic et al., 2020; Sage & Sage, 2016). Furthermore, creating safe spaces and support networks within the online community for foster youth is

essential. These support systems can include online mentorship programs, support groups, and forums designed for foster youth. By implementing these support mechanisms, foster youth can be better equipped to navigate the challenges associated with transitions and social media use. Lastly, some research suggests that child welfare organizations and professionals can utilize social media to enhance communication and support for foster youth. Using social media platforms, child welfare workers can effectively communicate with foster youth, provide peer support for foster parents, and maintain relationships between foster youth and their support networks (Clark et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2019).

**Education Concerns for Transitioning Foster Youth**

One of the critical challenges for transitioning foster youth is low educational attainment and unemployment (González-García et al., 2017; Huegaerts et al., 2018; Nandlall et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2015). During their time in the foster care system, many youths experience educational disruptions, which can result in significant educational gaps and delays (Roche et al., 2015; Stewart, 2022; Uffner et al., 2020). These disruptions can make it difficult for foster youth to catch up academically and graduate from high school or pursue higher education. Additionally, the foster care system's lack of stability and support may hinder their ability to develop critical academic skills and access resources necessary for academic success (Morton, 2013; Soman et al., 2021). Education among foster youth is significantly lower than among their non-foster care peers (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019; Morton, 2013). According to Dworsky (2018), only 50% of foster youth in the United States graduate from high school by the age of 18, compared to a national average of 85% (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019; Ma et al., 2023; Płatos & Pisula, 2019; Skourtes et al., 2022). Furthermore, foster youth are less likely to pursue higher education, with only 20% of former foster youth enrolling in college compared to 60% of young

adults in the general population (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019; Morton, 2013). The challenges associated with education and employment for transitioning foster youth are complex and multifaceted, requiring a comprehensive approach that addresses their unique needs and barriers.

### *Educational Disruptions in Foster Care*

Youth in foster care often face significant disruptions to their education. These disruptions can occur due to frequent school changes, tracking into primary education, attending low-performing schools, and needing remedial coursework (Dimakosa et al., 2022; Selya et al., 2016). Additionally, foster youth are more likely to experience school transfers, absenteeism, tardiness, suspension, and expulsion compared to their peers (González-García et al., 2017; Huegaerts et al., 2018). These disruptions can lead to lower levels of academic achievement and lower graduation rates and hinder the ability of foster youth to pursue postsecondary education (González-García et al., 2017; Huegaerts et al., 2018; Roche et al., 2015).

The challenges associated with educational disruptions in foster care pose significant obstacles for foster youth in their academic journey. These challenges can contribute to a cycle of academic underachievement and limited opportunities for foster youth, perpetuating the gap in postsecondary educational attainment between them and their non-foster care peers. Moreover, the child welfare system contributes to foster youth's educational challenges. Historically, the child welfare system has failed to prioritize and support foster youth in pursuing postsecondary education, leading to a lack of encouragement and guidance for these students (Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019; Morton, 2013). Lastly, the academic preparation of foster youth also plays a significant role in their ability to pursue postsecondary education. Many youths in foster care are not academically prepared for college due to the disruptions mentioned earlier, as well as other factors such as inconsistent access to quality educational resources, lack of stability and support

in their living environments, and limited access to extracurricular activities that promote academic growth and development (Schueler et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2015).

### *Lack of Stability and Support*

One significant factor contributing to foster youth's challenges in their educational transitions is the lack of stability and support. According to research, foster youth often experience frequent school changes, which can disrupt their academic progress and hinder their ability to form stable relationships with teachers and peers (González-García et al., 2017; Morton, 2013). Frequent school changes disrupt the foster youth's educational continuity and prevent them from building a solid support system within their schools. This lack of stability and support can negatively affect their academic performance and overall well-being, making it more difficult for them to transition into postsecondary education. Moreover, foster youth are often tracked into primary education or placed in low-performing schools, which can further hinder their academic preparedness for college (Schueler et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2015).

Lastly, foster youth also need help with stability amongst social workers and caregivers. They may experience frequent changes in their placement or have difficulty forming secure and trusting relationships with their caregivers, further exacerbating their challenges in pursuing postsecondary education. Research suggests that foster youth often struggle with stability in their social-worker and caregiver relationships due to high turnover rates in the child welfare system (González-García et al., 2017; Morton, 2013). In addition to the factors mentioned above, limited access to extracurricular activities that promote academic growth and development further contributes to the challenges foster youth face in their educational transitions (Schueler et al., 2021; Roche et al., 2015). The child welfare system's historically poor job of encouraging postsecondary education for youth in foster care has resulted in many of them being

academically unprepared for college, requiring remedial coursework once they enter postsecondary education (Morton, 2013).

*Comparative Educational Outcomes*

Comparative educational outcomes between foster youth and their non-foster care peers highlight the challenges faced by these vulnerable individuals. Previous research has shown that foster youth consistently have lower educational outcomes than their non-foster care peers. For example, Schueler et al. ( 2021) found that foster youth were less likely to graduate from high school and enroll in postsecondary education compared to their non-foster care peers. The study also found that even among those who did enroll in postsecondary education, foster youth were less likely to complete their degree. The study highlighted the significant educational disparities for foster youth, indicating their challenges in transitioning to postsecondary education.

Roche et al. (2015) found that foster youth had lower college enrollment rates and were less likely to earn a degree than their non-foster care peers. The study also found that even among foster youth who did enroll in college, they were more likely to experience interruptions in their education and take longer to complete their degree than their peers. These findings underscore the challenges that foster youth encounter when making educational transitions, as they face lower rates of college enrollment and completion and difficulties in navigating the educational system and staying on track to complete their degree. These findings indicate the significant disparities in educational attainment between foster youth and their non-foster care peers. Further research by González-García et al. (2017) supports these findings, showing that foster youth are less likely to complete a bachelor's degree than their peers.

*Policies and Interventions for Educational Success*

Several policies and interventions exist to address foster youth's challenges in their educational transitions. One notable policy is the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. 110 P.L. 351 122 STAT. 3949, 2008 Enacted H.R. 6893. (2008). which extended the age of foster care eligibility to 21 and provided additional support for educational attainment. This policy allows foster youth to continue their education beyond high school and receive support while transitioning into adulthood. Various intervention programs also support foster youth in their educational journeys. One such program is the State of Missouri's Educational Training Voucher program, which provides financial assistance to foster youth pursuing postsecondary education. This program aims to alleviate the financial burden of higher education and increase access and opportunity for foster youth.

Another intervention is the implementation of comprehensive support programs within postsecondary institutions. These programs, such as foster youth support centers or specialized advising services, offer personalized guidance and resources to help foster youth navigate their educational journey successfully. The programs provide academic, emotional, and financial support and opportunities for networking and community building among foster youth. Lastly, research has shown that early intervention and comprehensive academic support in high school can significantly contribute to the success of foster youth in their educational transitions (Eva & Thayer, 2017; Morton, 2013; White et al., 2023). By addressing academic and developmental gaps early on, these interventions can help foster youth overcome barriers and prepare for postsecondary education.

**Employment Concerns for Transitioning Foster Youth**

A lack of a robust support system during the transition can make it challenging for former foster youth to secure and maintain steady employment. Even if foster youth do manage to obtain a high school diploma or further their education, they often face difficulties in finding and maintaining employment (Behluli et al., 2022; Nandlall et al., 2022; Paul et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Employers may be reluctant to hire individuals with a history of foster care due to misconceptions and stigmas associated with the system (Collins et al., 2020; Moussavi et al., 2021; Southall et al., 2017). A lack of job readiness skills and work experience among transitioning foster youth further exacerbated the challenges faced by foster youth. The limited resources and support available to transitioning foster youth further hinder their ability to navigate the job market and secure stable employment (Paul et al., 2021; Ream et al., 2012).

Researchers have shown that foster youth have higher rates of unemployment compared to their non-foster peers (Collins et al., 2020; Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; Genussa, 2022; Maria et al., 2020; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Dworsky (2018) found that by age 24, only 55% of former foster youth had ever held a job, and many experienced frequent unemployment. The persistent cycle of unemployment can have long-lasting adverse effects on former foster youth's financial stability and overall well-being. While the foster care system has witnessed some policy advancements, foster youth's educational and psychosocial barriers persist (Moyer & Goldberg, 2020). Despite efforts to improve educational outcomes for foster youth through policies and interventions, the evidence suggests that they continue to face significant challenges in accessing and completing higher education due to a variety of factors (Hempel et al., 2019; Komro et al., 2013; Lickteig & Lickteig, 2019). This combination of low educational attainment and unemployment can create a cycle of financial insecurity and dependence on

public assistance (Huegaerts et al., 2018; Uffner et al., 2020). As a result, transitioning foster youth are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness and poverty due to a lack of education. Additionally, the challenges faced by transitioning foster youth are not limited to education and employment. Mental health and healthcare challenges are another significant issue for transitioning foster youth (Brown et al., 2019; Hawke et al., 2017).

### *Lack of Support System in Securing Employment*

One of the challenges faced by transitioning foster youth is the need for a support system in securing employment. The limited resources and support for transitioning foster youth create barriers to navigating the job market and securing stable employment. Studies have indicated that foster youth often lack access to the necessary resources and support systems for successful employment outcomes. These resources may include career counseling, job training programs, and networking opportunities (Font & Gershoff., 2020; Salazar & Schelbe., 2021). These essential supports are necessary for foster youth to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to search for and obtain employment effectively. Furthermore, the lack of a stable support system can hinder foster youth from maintaining employment once they have secured it. This lack of support often leaves transitioning foster youth vulnerable to job instability, leading to a higher likelihood of unemployment or underemployment (Roche et al., 2015).

### *Employer Reluctance and Misconceptions*

Another challenge transitioning foster youth face in securing employment is employer reluctance and misconceptions. Employers may hesitate to hire transitioning foster youth due to misconceptions and biases. They may hold stigmatizing beliefs about foster youth, such as assuming they have behavioral or emotional issues that could impact their work performance. These misconceptions can make employers less willing to give transitioning foster youth a

chance, leading to limited job opportunities and increased difficulty securing stable employment (Collins et al., 2020; Moussavi et al., 2021; Southall et al., 2017).

### *Job Readiness and Work Experience*

Additionally, transitioning foster youth often face job readiness and work experience challenges. They may need more skills, work experience, and education to compete in the job market. These challenges arise due to disruptions in their education, unstable living situations, and limited access to opportunities for skill development leading to work experience. These factors contribute to a significant gap between the employment readiness of transitioning foster youth and their counterparts who have yet to experience the foster care system (Font & Gershoff, 2020). These challenges can create a cycle of limited job prospects and lower earnings for transitioning foster youth. Research has shown that foster youth have lower employment rates and earnings than their peers (Apedaile et al., 2022; Bald et al., 2022; Biebel et al., 2020). These challenges with job readiness and work experience make it even more difficult for transitioning foster youth to achieve self-sufficiency and financial stability in adulthood (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Southall et al., 2017).

### *Comparative Employment Outcomes*

Comparative research on employment outcomes highlights disparities faced by transitioning foster youth. Studies have shown that transitioning foster youth are at a disadvantage compared to their peers regarding employment outcomes (Apedaile et al., 2022; Roche et al., 2015). Transitioning foster youth experience lower employment, earnings, and unemployment rates than their non-fostered peers (Font & Gershoff, 2020; Southall et al., 2017), disparities linked to issues such as early pregnancy and parenthood, mental health challenges, substance use disorders, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Researchers found

that foster youth who experienced placement and school instability during their time in care were more likely to have lower educational and employment outcomes (Collins et al., 2020; Moussavi et al., 2021).

Moreover, disparities in employment outcomes for transitioning foster youth are not uniform across all demographic groups. For instance, research has shown differences in employment outcomes based on gender, race and ethnicity, disability status, and parental status among transitioning foster youth (Southall et al., 2017). Foster youth who identify as female may face additional challenges in securing stable employment, with research indicating that they experience higher rates of underemployment and lower wages than their male counterparts (Morton, 2013). Additionally, racial and ethnic disparities contribute to differential employment outcomes for transitioning foster youth. For example, studies have found that African American and Hispanic foster youth tend to have lower employment rates and earnings than their White counterparts (Southall et al., 2017). Furthermore, transitioning foster youth with disabilities may face barriers to employment due to limitations in physical or cognitive abilities. These challenges can hinder their ability to secure and maintain employment at a level commensurate with their skills and qualifications.

In addition to demographic disparities, experiences in the foster care system also influence the challenges faced by transitioning foster youth into employment. For instance, studies have shown that foster youth who age out of the system without supportive relationships and independent living skills are more likely to experience difficulties in finding and maintaining employment. Specifically, research has found that foster youth who have experienced multiple placement changes and disruptions in their education are more likely to face challenges in

accessing stable employment and achieving educational success (Collins et al., 2020; Moussavi et al., 2021).

### *Long-term Implications of Unemployment*

The long-term implications of unemployment for transitioning foster youth are significant and multifaceted. Research has consistently shown that former foster youth who experience unemployment or underemployment are at a higher risk of living in poverty than their non-fostered peers (Font & Gershoff; Southall et al., 2017). Furthermore, the challenges associated with unemployment can perpetuate a cycle of disadvantage for transitioning foster youth. For instance, individuals unable to secure stable employment may struggle to meet their basic needs and become more vulnerable to homelessness. Studies have found that former foster youth are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to their non-fostered peers (Collins et al., 2020). This increased risk of homelessness can harm the overall well-being and stability of transitioning foster youth, making it even more difficult for them to find and maintain employment in the future.

Furthermore, unemployment among transitioning foster youth can also contribute to their involvement in the criminal justice system. Research has consistently shown that former foster youth who experience unemployment or underemployment are at a higher risk of engaging in criminal activities and being incarcerated (Font & Gershoff; Southall et al., 2017). COVID-19 compounded those challenges as the pandemic disproportionately affected vulnerable populations, including transitioning foster youth. The socioeconomic precarity commonly associated with transitions from foster care to adulthood has made older foster youth uniquely vulnerable during the pandemic, exacerbating threats to their physical and socioeconomic health (Berg & Brännström, 2018; Lind et al., 2018).

**Healthcare Access Issues for Transitioning Foster Youth**

Another significant challenge transitioning foster youth faces is limited access to healthcare (Decker et al., 2021; Goicolea et al., 2022; Uffner et al., 2020). Many youths may not receive consistent and comprehensive healthcare services in foster care. A lack of access to healthcare can have long-lasting effects on the physical and mental well-being of transitioning foster youth. Without proper healthcare, foster youth may struggle to address their medical and mental health needs, leading to an increased risk of chronic illnesses, substance abuse, and mental health challenges. Transitioning foster youth are particularly vulnerable to mental health challenges. The combination of traumatic experiences, instability, and often a lack of support during their time in foster care can contribute to the development of mental health issues (Damian et al., 2021; Maria et al., 2020; Seker et al., 2022; Simon & Blanchet, 2022; Uffner et al., 2020). Foster youth healthcare access is a complex issue that involves multiple barriers. These barriers include inadequate insurance coverage, limited access to healthcare providers, and a lack of continuity of care (Seretlo & Mokgatle, 2022). Furthermore, foster youth often face difficulties navigating the healthcare system and understanding their rights and resources (Bodhisane & Pongpanich, 2019; Dadich & Jarrett, 2019; Gyan et al., 2023). Inadequate access to quality healthcare for transitioning foster youth is a critical issue to address. Health care is vital to developing youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood as it is crucial to their overall well-being and successful transition (McMillen et al., 2015; Yildiz & Fidanci, 2019).

*Inconsistencies in Healthcare Services During Foster Care*

During their time in foster care, transitioning youth may experience inconsistencies in accessing healthcare services due to various factors. These factors can include changes in placement or caregivers, lack of transportation to appointments, inadequate supervision and

support from caseworkers, and limited awareness of available healthcare resources (Decker et al., 2021; Goicolea et al., 2022; Uffner et al., 2020). Transitions within the foster care system can disrupt the continuity of healthcare services for youth, leading to gaps in their medical and mental health care. These disruptions can have detrimental effects on their overall health and well-being.

Transitioning from foster care to adulthood is a critical period where many foster youths face significant challenges in accessing adequate healthcare services and support. The structural differences between pediatric and adult healthcare systems exacerbate these challenges. For children in foster care, the coincidental loss of foster care services at the age of transition is an additional burden. A multidisciplinary approach to healthcare is less common in adult systems, leaving some youth without necessary developmental and mental health care and thus posing a barrier to successful transition.

### *Mental Health Vulnerabilities*

In addition to the challenges of accessing healthcare services, transitioning foster youth face significant mental health vulnerabilities. The stress and trauma experienced by foster youth throughout their lives can contribute to a higher prevalence of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse (Damian et al., 2021; Maria et al., 2020; Seker et al., 2022). These mental health challenges may be further exacerbated during the transition to adulthood, as youth face additional stressors such as aging out of the foster care system, finding stable housing and employment, and establishing a support network independently.

Moreover, mental health care utilization declines substantially during the transition period for transitioning foster youth (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Factors such as

insurance status, age of exit from foster care, race/ethnicity, gender, and geographic location mediate mental health service discontinuity in this population (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Substance abuse and chronic illnesses may also contribute to the challenges transitioning foster youth face in accessing mental health services (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Chronic illnesses may include conditions such as asthma, diabetes, and heart disease, which can have long-term impacts on both physical and mental well-being. Such challenges highlight the need for targeted and comprehensive mental health services tailored to the unique needs of transitioning foster youth (Maria et al., 2020; Seker et al., 2022).

### Barriers to Healthcare Access

Transitioning foster youth face significant barriers to accessing healthcare services, including mental health care. One significant barrier is the discontinuity of insurance coverage. This discontinuity is often due to youth aging out of the foster care system, which results in the loss of Medicaid coverage that they previously had while in care (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Without adequate insurance coverage, transitioning foster youth cannot afford the cost of healthcare services, including mental healthcare services. Additionally, there are often limited resources and financial support for transitioning foster youth, exacerbating their difficulties in accessing mental health care services (Uffner et al., 2020; Maria et al., 2020). Moreover, the limited knowledge of navigating the healthcare system presents an additional obstacle for transitioning foster youth in obtaining mental health services. They may lack awareness of available resources and support or struggle to navigate the intricate healthcare system, leading to further hindrances in accessing mental health care.

*Decline in Mental Health Services Use*

The decline in mental health service use links to various factors, including the limited availability of providers working with transitioning foster youth, lack of transportation to healthcare appointments, financial barriers, and stigma associated with seeking mental health treatment. During the transition period, there is a substantial decline in the utilization of mental health services among youth aging out of foster care (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). This decline in service use connects with various factors, including changes in insurance status, sociodemographic characteristics, and lack of resources. Specifically, studies have shown that insurance status significantly mediates mental health service discontinuity for transitioning foster youth (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Other reasons for access to mental health services include the age of exit from foster care, race/ethnicity, gender, and geographic location (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Furthermore, the decline in mental health service utilization can be attributed to the lack of financial resources and limited personal and family connections that transitioning foster youth often face (Maria et al., 2020; Uffner et al., 2020).

*Importance of Comprehensive Healthcare*

Comprehensive healthcare is essential for transitioning foster youth as they navigate the challenges of moving through or leaving the foster care system. These youth must have access to mental health services, as they often face unique and complex challenges related to their experiences in foster care and the transition to adulthood. These challenges can include trauma, loss, instability, and a lack of supportive relationships. Given the high need for mental health support among transitioning foster youth, they must have access to comprehensive healthcare services that address their specific needs (McMillen et al., 2015; Yildiz & Fidanci, 2019). Without a comprehensive healthcare system in place, transitioning foster youth may struggle to

access the developmental and mental health care they require, leading to further barriers in their successful transition to adulthood and increased vulnerability to adverse outcomes such as homelessness, substance abuse, and involvement in the criminal justice system (Decker et al., 2021; Maria et al., 2020).

**Compounding Challenges for Expectant or Parenting Foster Youth**

Challenges associated with transitions for foster youth further compound when they become expectant or parenting youth. Indeed, research has shown that expectant and parenting foster youth face even more significant challenges during their transition through foster and adulthood (Maria et al., 2020; McMillen et al., 2015; Morton, 2013; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021). The responsibilities and demands of parenthood further compound the challenges of aging out of foster care. These young parents not only have to navigate the typical challenges of transitioning into adulthood but also have the added pressure of caring for a child. This combination of transitioning out of foster care and becoming a parent can lead to an increased likelihood of dropping out of school, struggling to find and maintain employment, and facing unstable housing conditions (Brown et al., 2019; Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; González-García et al., 2017; Maria et al., 2020; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020).

*Unique Challenges for Parenting Foster Youth*

Parenting foster youth face specific challenges that complicate their transition to adulthood. Parenting foster youth often struggle with limited support systems and resources, making it challenging to meet their and their children's needs (Morton, 2013; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021). In addition, parenting foster youth may experience difficulties in accessing stable and affordable housing, adequate childcare services, and appropriate healthcare for themselves and their children (Decker et al., 2021; Maria et al., 2020; McMillen et al., 2015). Research indicates

that the challenges faced by parenting foster youth are multifaceted and interconnected; these difficulties encompass a range of obstacles:

- The challenge of balancing parenting responsibilities with the demands of education or employment: Parenting foster youth face the unique challenge of juggling the responsibilities of being a parent while also pursuing education or employment opportunities that would provide them with financial stability.

- The challenge of accessing adequate childcare: Parenting foster youth often struggle to find reliable and affordable childcare options that accommodate their unique circumstances.

- The challenge of limited social support: Parenting foster youth often lack the necessary social support networks to navigate parenthood and adulthood challenges (Palacios et al., 2020; Uffner et al., 2020).

- The challenge of financial instability: Parenting foster youth often experience financial instability, which can hinder their ability to provide for themselves and their children.

Lastly, parenting foster youth may also face stigma and judgment from society due to their young age and history of being in foster care, which can further exacerbate their challenges (McMillen et al., 2015; Morton, 2013).

### *Education and Employment Hurdles*

Education and employment hurdles are significant challenges faced by parenting foster youth. Parenting foster youth often struggle to balance the responsibilities of parenthood with pursuing education or employment opportunities. These individuals face the dilemma of providing for their children while furthering their education or securing stable employment.

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Limited access to educational resources and support services can hinder their ability to complete high school or pursue higher education. Additionally, parenting foster youth may face employment barriers such as lack of job experience or skills, limited access to job training programs, and discrimination in the hiring process. Furthermore, parenting foster youth may also face challenges in accessing adequate childcare. These challenges make parenting foster youth unable to attend school or work consistently and effectively.

*Housing Instabilities*

Housing instability is a significant challenge that foster youth face during adulthood. Foster youth parents often struggle to secure stable and safe housing for themselves and their children. They may face difficulties finding affordable housing options that accommodate their unique circumstances as young parents with limited income or credit history. Furthermore, they may encounter discrimination from landlords who may be less willing to rent to young parents or individuals with a history of foster care. These housing challenges can lead to frequent moves, unstable living situations, or even homelessness for parenting foster youth and their children. Research suggests that parenting foster youth are at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness compared to their non-parenting counterparts (Berg & Brännström, 2018; Maria et al., 2020).

*Mental Health Implications for Young Parents*

Mental health implications for foster parents are another challenge they may face during their transition to adulthood. The stresses and demands of parenthood, coupled with the existing challenges of aging out of foster care, can take a toll on the mental well-being of these young parents. These young parents may experience increased stress, anxiety, and depression as they navigate parenting responsibilities while also dealing with the unresolved trauma from their experiences in foster care. Moreover, parenting foster youth may face limited access to mental

health resources or experience barriers in seeking help for their mental health concerns. For instance, they may lack health insurance coverage or face challenges in finding mental health providers knowledgeable about the unique needs and experiences of young parents in foster care. Some studies state that parenting foster youth are more likely to experience mental health challenges compared to their non-parenting peers, highlighting the need for targeted support and intervention in this vulnerable population (Babbage et al., 2022; Folk et al., 2022).

**Role of Support Networks in Easing Transitions for Foster Youth**

Support networks play a crucial role in easing the transitions for foster youth (providing emotional support, guidance, and resources needed for successful transitions into adulthood (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Agencies must strengthen and expand support networks to improve outcomes for foster youth transitioning to adulthood through initiatives such as mentorship programs, where experienced adults can provide guidance and support to foster youth during their transition (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022; Terrile, 2022). Additionally, establishing support groups specifically for expectant and parenting foster youth can provide a space for them to connect with others facing similar challenges and access resources tailored to their unique needs. Research has shown that maintaining social connections and reconnecting with people in their social network is critical to successful adaptation after transitioning out of foster care. Hence, fostering strong and supportive relationships for these young adults can significantly contribute to their well-being and transition success (Roche et al., 2015).

*Understanding the Role of Support Networks*

Understanding the role of support networks is crucial in addressing the challenges foster youth face during their transition to adulthood. Support networks encompass various individuals,

such as foster parents, extended family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and social workers, who can provide guidance, advice, and emotional support (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). These support networks can offer practical assistance, such as help with housing, education, employment, and accessing resources within the community. Research has shown that foster youth who have supportive relationships and regular positive contact with their birth families experience better physical and mental health outcomes compared to those who lack such relationships (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020).

### *Mentorship as a Pillar of Support*

Mentorship programs have emerged as a valuable pillar of support for foster youth during their transition to adulthood (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022). These programs involve matching foster youth with caring non-parent adults who can provide guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance as they navigate the challenges of adulthood. Mentors serve as additional sources of support and guidance, supplementing the existing network of supportive relationships for foster youth (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022). The presence of mentors in the lives of foster youth associates with positive psychological outcomes, including improved social connectedness and overall well-being (Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014).

Mentoring relationships offer a sense of social connectedness, which is crucial for foster youth who often struggle with maintaining relationships with their birth families due to various reasons such as neglect, abuse, or separation (Roche et al., 2015; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). These relationships provide foster youth with a consistent and reliable source of guidance and support, helping them navigate the social and academic challenges they may encounter during their transition to adulthood (Roche et al., 2015; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Research has

consistently shown that mentoring programs for foster youth have a positive impact on their social skills, interpersonal trust, and overall socioemotional development (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Moreover, mentoring programs have been found to enhance the quality of peer and parental relationships for foster youth (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Lastly, a successful mentorship program will encompass providing support and guidance in various aspects of foster youth's lives. Mentorship programs can include academic support, career guidance, life skills development, and assistance with navigating the challenges of independent living (Roche et al., 2015; Tschanz & Powell, 2020).

### *Specialized Support Groups for Parenting Foster Youth*

In addition to mentoring programs, specialized support groups for parenting foster youth can also play a crucial role in addressing the challenges associated with their transition to adulthood. These support groups provide a safe and understanding space for foster youth who are also parents, allowing them to connect with others who share similar experiences and challenges (Smith et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2021). These support groups can offer a range of benefits for parenting foster youth, including emotional support, practical advice and resources, and opportunities for skill-building and personal growth (Smith et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2021). Furthermore, specialized support groups can address the unique needs and concerns of parenting foster youth, such as balancing their own needs with the responsibilities of parenting, managing the complexities of the child welfare system, and navigating co-parenting relationships with birth parents and foster parents (Smith et al., 2018; Matos et al., 2021).

*The Power of Social Connections*

Research suggests that social connections and supportive relationships play a significant role in the successful transition of foster youth into adulthood (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). These connections provide a sense of belonging and social connectedness, which can mitigate the adverse effects of transitioning out of foster care and entering young adulthood. By having meaningful relationships with caring non-parental adults, such as mentors or support group members, foster youth are more likely to develop essential social skills and develop a sense of trust in interpersonal relationships (Roche et al., 2015; González-García et al., 2017). They can also receive emotional support, guidance, and practical assistance in navigating their challenges during the transition process and beyond (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Additionally, these social connections can provide stability and permanence for foster youth who may lack consistent familial relationships. Lastly, connection can mitigate feelings of isolation and increase adaptability in new environments during the transition period. Research suggests that adult social support is crucial for at-risk youth, particularly those in the foster care system (Gale, 2021).

## Theoretical Framework

### Schlossberg's Transition Theory

One theoretical framework helpful in understanding and analyzing the challenges associated with transitions for foster youth is Schlossberg's (1984) Transition Theory. Schlossberg's Transition Theory focuses on individuals navigating and adapting to different life transitions (Gray et al., 2022; Nyar, 2021; Saxe et al., 2017). According to Schlossberg (1984), several dimensions characterize transitions, including (a) the event that triggers the transition, (b)

the duration and intensity of the transition, (c) the individual's perceptions and appraisals of the transition, (d) the resources available, and (e) the support systems in place during the transition (Nyar, 2021). In transitioning through the foster care system, Schlossberg's Transition Theory can help shed light on the challenges foster youth face during this critical period (González-García et al., 2017).

Schlossberg's transition theory provides researchers with an additional understanding of different characterization types concerning transitions and influencing factors (Hunter-Johnson, 2021). Transition theory highlights the importance of recognizing the individual's perception of the transition and the available resources and support systems, a crucial component in understanding the challenges foster youth face during their transition to adulthood. Schlossberg's Transition Theory emphasizes the individual perspectives on transitions, including both anticipated and unanticipated transitions (Hunter-Johnson, 2021). Furthermore, Schlossberg's theory acknowledges that transitions are not isolated events but ongoing processes that unfold over time (Motala & Wyk, 2021). By applying Schlossberg's Transition Theory to the experiences of foster youth, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges these young individuals face during their transition through the foster care system and into adulthood.

Schlossberg's model emphasizes four factors that influence transitions: (a) situation, (b) self, (c) support, and (d) strategy (Hunter-Johnson, 2021). In the context of foster youth, the situation factor refers to the specific circumstances and events contributing to the transition experience. For foster youth, this may include entering the foster care system, moving to different foster homes, aging out of foster care, or transitioning to independent living arrangements. The self factor in Schlossberg's model relates to the personal and psychological characteristics of the foster youth that may affect their perception and adaptation to the transition

(Hunter-Johnson, 2021). These characteristics include resilience, self-esteem, coping skills, and a sense of identity. The support factor in Schlossberg's model recognizes the importance of social support systems in facilitating successful transitions, including support from foster parents, caseworkers, mentors, teachers, and peers for foster youth. Finally, the strategy factor in Schlossberg's model refers to the individual's problem-solving skills and ability to navigate the challenges and demands of the transition, involving setting goals, seeking out resources and services, developing coping strategies, and making decisions that contribute to a positive transition experience. In the context of foster youth, Schlossberg's Transition Theory offers valuable insights into their challenges during adulthood.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

Another conceptual framework that can be employed to comprehend and assess the difficulties connected with transitions for young people in foster care is Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Albert Bandura created social cognitive theory to emphasize the interaction between an individual's thoughts, behaviors, and social environment (Bandura, 2002). Social cognitive theory posits that individuals learn and develop through observing, imitating, and modeling others' behaviors. SCT posits that individuals' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors form based on their social environment, including the people they interact with and exposure to social norms. In the context of transitions for foster youth, Social cognitive theory highlights the importance of observing and learning from positive adult role models who can provide guidance and support during the transition process (Brown et al., 2019; Roche et al., 2015). Social cognitive theory emphasizes the role of self-efficacy or an individual's belief in their ability to succeed in challenging situations. Self-efficacy is particularly pertinent in transitioning foster youth, who may face numerous obstacles and uncertainties during this period. These challenges can involve

maintaining stable housing, finding employment or educational opportunities, and navigating the complexities of the adult world. Transitions for foster youth can be challenging due to a lack of supportive relationships and resources, leading to instability and negative outcomes.

**Social Learning Theory**

Social learning theory presents a third theoretical framework relevant to understanding the challenges associated with transitions for foster youth. Social Learning Theory, proposed by Albert Bandura, suggests that individuals learn and acquire their behaviors through observing and imitating others. In foster youth's case, Social Learning Theory highlights how their observations and interactions with adults and peers shape their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors during the transition process. This theoretical framework suggests that foster youth may learn positive or harmful coping mechanisms and strategies from the adults and peers in their social environment, which can significantly impact their ability to navigate transitions successfully (Kim & Lee, 2018; Sisson et al., 2016). Transitions for foster youth can be particularly challenging due to the limited availability of positive adult role models and supportive relationships in their social environment. This lack of positive modeling and support can hinder their ability to develop the necessary skills and resilience to navigate the complex challenges of adulthood. Social Learning Theory will assist with understanding how foster youth learn and acquire the necessary skills and knowledge during the transition process and the potential barriers they may face in developing these skills due to a lack of positive role models and support systems.

**General Strains Theory**

The final theoretical framework that can help explain the challenges associated with transitions for foster youth is the General Strain Theory (GST). General strain theory, developed

by Robert Agnew (2020), posits that individuals may experience strain or stress due to adverse life events or circumstances, which can lead to negative emotions and behavioral responses. For foster youth, the experience of transitioning within the foster care system and out of foster care can be a major life event that is inherently stressful and strain-inducing. This transition involves significant changes in living arrangements, support systems, and responsibilities, which can contribute to feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and isolation. These feelings of strain and stress can lead to negative emotions, such as anger or depression, which may manifest in maladaptive behaviors, such as drug use, delinquency, or self-harm. General strain theory helped to highlight the various forms of strain and stress that foster youth may experience during their transitions from foster care into adulthood.

## Summary

Based on the literature reviewed, numerous challenges associate with transitions for foster youth. These challenges include difficulties maintaining relationships with birth families, adjusting to abrupt changes during transition and discharge from foster care, and the potential adverse effects of social media use on mental health and well-being. Additionally, the literature review highlighted the importance of providing educational opportunities and resources for foster youth to enhance their chances of successful adaptation after leaving care. Challenges can significantly impact the long-term socioeconomic outcomes of foster youth, including low educational attainment, unemployment, homelessness, mental health challenges, and involvement in criminal activities. To address these challenges, policymakers, social workers, and other professionals in the child welfare system must develop and implement comprehensive transition programs to support foster youth in their transition to adulthood. Moreover, providing foster youth with a strong support network that includes safe and stable housing, access to

education and employment opportunities, and mentor support is essential. Furthermore, it is crucial to prioritize foster youth's mental health and well-being during this transitional period. Lastly, the literature review has shed light on the numerous challenges that foster youth face during their transition to adulthood. Chapter 3 will discuss the study's methodology and outline study components to include the research design and sampling methodology. Additionally, it describes the measures used to assess the challenges foster youth face during their transitions. Chapter 3 also addresses the study design's ethical considerations and potential limitations.

# Chapter 3- Methodology

In this chapter, I describe the qualitative methodology used in this study, specifically the phenomenological methodology. I discuss my approach to interpretive phenomenology, data collection through semi-structured interviews, and data analysis techniques. I describe my participant selection process, data management, and representation to further analyze the meaning and interpretations that participants ascribe to the phenomenon under investigation. The concluding section thoroughly addresses critical elements such as academic rigor, credibility, dependability, transferability, authenticity, and confirmability to maintain confidentiality and adhere to ethical guidelines. I start by discussing my researcher positionality to acknowledge potential biases or preconceived notions that might have impacted the study.

## Researcher Positionality

As the researcher conducting this study, I am particularly interested in exploring how transitioning affects foster youth's overall growth and development. As this study's primary researcher and sole interviewer, I am cognizant of my potential bias. I comprehend that adjusting to new surroundings can have positive and negative outcomes for young individuals. I am also aware of the negative stigma placed on foster youth who transition often while in children's division custody. As the investigator, I maintained a rigorous level of detachment in my analysis throughout the study. My background as a former foster youth and how transitioning affected me during my time in care played a significant role in enabling me to empathize with and articulate the perspectives of the study participants. My experience, knowledge, and skills allowed me to interpret and analyze the collected data.

I carry very little unearned power and privileges with me as I attempt to venture out and explore other people's sociocultural boundaries or identify new ones within myself. I was born

powerless and in both the economic and resourceful sense. My lived experiences within the

world of foster care and the people I have met along the way (social workers, school counselors,

individual therapists, other foster youth, etc.) have directly contributed to some of my current

biases and privileges. I will be the first to acknowledge that placement within the foster care

system was not all bad and came with unique privileges. I have explored three significant

impacts of the resources and privileges in foster care that have shaped my life differently from

other young individuals who did not have access to them.

1. As a foster youth, I could often arrange to be placed in a different household to
   include people with whom I was more comfortable.

2. As a foster youth, I had access to free health care and mental health treatment.

3. As a foster youth, I was confident that the State of Missouri would meet my basic
   needs.

As I strive to acknowledge and integrate my previous encounters within the foster care

system into my broader research on transitioning and school engagement among older youth, a

recurring observation has been the inadequacies of certain social workers and educators. Some

social workers and educators may hesitate to recognize or not understand the significance of

transitioning from foster care and having consistent adult support in fostering school engagement

(Longobardi et al., 2016). There appears to be a lack of knowledge among social workers and

teachers regarding the significant influence that transitioning in care, consistent parenting, and

stable placement can have on the overall level of school engagement for older youths (Agbo,

2021). I have developed a perspective in which I see school engagement as a chance to establish

and enhance connections that hold significance for us individually. This consequently has led me

to a more engaging, successful, and fruitful high school experience. As adults who have

successfully integrated into society after their time in foster care, we implore social workers and educators to enhance their understanding of and support the unique needs of foster youth. However, it is crucial to understand the reasons behind youth's disengagement in school based on their perspectives. When considering the potential impact of my perspective on my research, data collection, and data presentation, I need to acknowledge any biases that may be present through reflective methods. Reflective practices focus on self-awareness and understanding one's biases and assumptions (Miller, 2020).

As a therapist, school counselor, and individual once in foster care, I endeavor to share different narratives with a broader audience. Having experienced firsthand the challenges of low levels of academic involvement and a lack of stable adult support during my time in foster care, I am inspired to bring forth diverse experiences for others to learn from. My study aims to illuminate the correlation between adult guidance, stability in foster homes, and the level of high school involvement among youth in foster care. I have had the privilege to commence my professional journey in social work at a state-level position, where I have worked closely with foster youth and their families. I am currently a practicing therapist and school counselor. As someone who has lived through the struggles of foster home transitions and lack of adult guidance, the people I interviewed may have viewed me as one of them, potentially leading to more guanine and fruitful interviews. I consider myself fortunate to have overcome these obstacles and achieve success. However, I must recognize that my experience was just a small part of the more comprehensive picture. Researchers must incorporate insights from multiple sources to gain a comprehensive understanding to obtain an accurate and thorough comprehension of the factors impacting school engagement among foster care youth.

**Research Questions**

Research questions guide the study and provide a clear focus for data collection and analysis (Butz & Mrożewski, 2021; Marshall et al., 2021). Research question development adheres to a structured process that connects existing theories and previous empirical findings to the most appropriate research design (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2014). I used question development guidelines from literature in foster care and education to inform the development of research questions. Qualitative research questions help to explore and understand phenomena rather than test hypotheses (Astutik et al., 2022; Büyükaşik-Çolak & Gençöz, 2020; Gorda & Anggreswari, 2018; Moon et al., 2016). The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. How do former foster youth describe experiences with foster home transitions?

RQ2. How do former foster youth describe the navigation of high school while transitioning to new homes?

**Research Design**

I chose the qualitative method for this study. Qualitative research encompasses methods that help them explore and understand social phenomena from the perspective of the individuals involved (Ferrero et al., 2016; Jefrydin et al., 2019; Marshall et al., 2021; Wang & Ma, 2020). Qualitative research allows for rich, in-depth exploration of the experiences and perspectives of individuals, which is particularly valuable when studying sensitive topics such as the experiences of foster care youth (Collin-Vézina et al., 2021; Philip et al., 2021). Instead of focusing on statistics, qualitative research methods such as interviews, observations, and open-ended questioning were employed to delve into the subject matter (Gangchuk, 2023; Irarrázaval, 2020). The importance of obtaining thorough and detailed descriptions of participants' personal experiences during interviews is significant in addressing the research questions, thus

highlighting the relevance of conducting a qualitative inquiry. Therefore, a qualitative research approach is suitable for addressing the research questions. A qualitative research method in this study is considered the most appropriate method for exploring and understanding the experiences of foster care youth about their transitions and educational experiences.

I have chosen the qualitative research method to investigate and gain an understanding of the personal experiences and transitions that older youth in foster care go through. This method allows researchers to explore lived experiences and obtain detailed descriptions from their perspective by applying a phenomenological design. Moreover, it is essential to have extensive and detailed information from participants' responses to effectively investigate the issue of educators and foster parents facing challenges in providing socialization and support for older youth in foster care, leading them toward success. Hence, a qualitative method is the most suitable approach for this study. I aim to present former foster youth's personal experiences and perspectives to academic audiences, readers, and the professional community.

**Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

The history of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) began with the work of Jonathan Smith in the 1990s. He developed this approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals and understand how they make sense of their world. IPA involves an in-depth analysis of individual experiences through a phenomenological lens, with a focus on exploring the participants' subjective interpretations and meanings (Smith et al., 2022). By employing IPA, I aim to uncover former foster youth's unique perspectives and interpretations regarding their experiences with foster home transitions and navigating high school while transitioning to new homes. According to Smith et al. (2011), the central aim of IPA is to examine individuals' experiences and their interpretation of a specific phenomenon. I focused on the experiences and

interpretations of former foster youth regarding foster home transitions and navigating high school while transitioning to new homes. The researcher's understanding and interpretation of each participant's perspectives reflect both the phenomena under study and their subjective interpretations, leading to alternative ways of comprehending the phenomenon (García et al., 2021; Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020; Young et al., 2021).

I justified using IPA in this study by its fundamental principles aligned with the research questions and the need for descriptive responses. The tenets of IPA support the exploration of individuals' personal experiences, their interpretations, and the meanings they attach to those experiences (Facchin et al., 2020; Myrhøj et al., 2021; Yale, 2020). Researchers should recognize that humans exist within the world as embedded and inseparable from it. Individuals understand and interpret the world, objects, and interactions formed by their unique personal experiences (Aguilar-Córcoles et al., 2023;). Similarly, the participants in this study individually described their existence and elucidated how they value and comprehend their interactions within the world.

The choice to use interpretive phenomenological analysis as a research design was intentional to gain insight into the personal experiences of individuals navigating transitions in foster care and receiving educational support (Gabrielsen et al., 2019). The focus of IPA is on understanding how participants make sense of these experiences, and it allows for exploring their lived realities (Arvola & Linder, 2018; Facchin et al., 2020). Interpretive phenomenology helps explore persons' relatedness to, or involvement in, a particular event or process deemed a phenomenon (LeRouge et al., 2022; Smith & Osborn., 2014). Using the phenomenological approach, researchers understand the essence and characteristics of the object or phenomenon under investigation (Abduelkarem et al., 2018; Smith & Osborn., 2014; Tahkola et al., 2021).

The present research aims to shed light on the experiences of young individuals in foster care and their journey navigating transitions and receiving support in education. Given this objective, IPA was deemed the most suitable research methodology for this study. IPA allows for exploring personal experiences and understanding how these individuals perceive and navigate their educational journeys.

IPA is well-suited for this study as it enables exploration, description, interpretation, and contextualization of how participants derive meaning from their experiences. Understanding the intricate phenomenon of FFY's lived experiences with transitions and support during their time in foster care necessitates adopting an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis approach. I recognize the intricate nature of transitioning and support for older youth in foster care. I must consider contextual factors, everyday situations, and the lived experiences of the individuals involved to comprehend this phenomenon.

## Participant Selection and Individual Interviews

Selecting participants is a crucial aspect of conducting an IPA of lived experiences. Given the significance of my study on transitions in foster care and support for older youth, employing a methodology that allows for an in-depth exploration of their lived experiences is crucial. In qualitative research, it is essential to ensure that participants are accessible, have firsthand experience with the phenomenon under study, and are willing to share their lived experiences (Philip et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2019). Hence, it is crucial to identify individuals who have firsthand experience with transitioning into foster care and receiving support during the process. Their willingness to share their unique experiences will significantly contribute to the research and findings of this study.

IPA research often involves small sample sizes (Cowley et al., 2020; Maynard et al., 2022). Due to the time-intensive nature of this research, it is most efficient when conducted with smaller sample sizes. In interpretative phenomenological analysis, the sample size plays a crucial role in thoroughly examining and understanding the lived experiences of individuals (Asim et al., 2022; Fussell & Stollery, 2012). The IPA design values detailed accounts of personal involvement within specific contexts, allowing for an in-depth exploration of communication meanings. Although conducting interviews with each participant can be time-consuming, it enables a comprehensive analysis of their unique perspectives and the subsequent sense-making process (Bentley et al., 2021; Daly et al., 2015; García et al., 2021; Nave et al., 2021; Philip et al., 2021).

In an interpretative phenomenological analysis study, participants need to be carefully and deliberately selected (Cowley et al., 2020; Rahmawati & Faidah, 2020). The participants in the study may have experienced a particular event. The deliberate selection of participants was an appropriate method for identifying individuals suitable for this study. Purposive sampling deliberately informs and comprehends the research issue through participant choice (Mabasa & Olutola, 2021). The participants in this study were intentionally chosen based on their experiences of transitioning into foster care as older youths. Researchers have explored the distinct elements to consider when formulating a participant profile, such as gender, race, socioeconomic status, and education (Alajärvi et al., 2021; Al-Shammari et al., 2022; Argyriadis et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2021; Ferguson & Lovell, 2015; Khampirat, 2020; Lara et al., 2021; Marshburn et al., 2020).

For this study, the criteria used for participant selection were to identify as a Former Foster Youth in their first year of college or as a full-time working professional. The inclusion criteria for the present study were:

- Have been a youth in the foster care system in the United States between ages 13–18. The state that the participant was in care of did not matter, but they must have experienced a foster home transition during their time in care.

- Be enrolled (freshman) in post-secondary education or a first year working professional (full-time; place of employment did not matter).

- Be willing to volunteer and sign the study's informed consent statement to participate in the interview.

I selected 10 study participants who identified as Former Foster Youth. The sample consisted of eight participants who were first-year full-time professionals and two individuals identified as first-year college students. The study included two male and eight female participants identified through the selection process. Participation in the study was voluntary and confidential. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had been in foster care during their teenage years and had experienced transitions and educational support. I sought individuals who could provide rich and meaningful insights into their experiences within the foster care system and educational journeys. Before the interview's, informed consent was obtained from each participant to ensure their understanding of the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks and benefits.

**Research Site**

Interviews for this study were conducted through an online platform to protect the privacy of participants. This data collection method was selected to protect the confidentiality

and anonymity of the participants throughout the research process. The research site was accessible via Zoom. To protect their identity, I assigned a pseudonym (e.g., Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3) to each participant. I opted to conduct the focus group interviews using Zoom to prioritize safety and adhere to social distancing protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic. The online platform used for data collection was Zoom, as it allowed for the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants.

## Data Collection Methods

Effective data collection methods require thorough organization, adaptability, and consideration (Meirte, 2020; Archibald et al., 2019). Data emerged through semi-structured interviews with participants who met the predetermined criteria. I also observed these interviews and subsequent re-observations occurred for transcription. The interviews were conducted using an online platform and lasted around one hour. Each interview was recorded through Zoom and later transcribed. Following the Interview Guide for Former Foster Youth Interviews, I used open-ended questions to ensure consistency in the questioning approach. Open-ended questions allow participants to provide detailed and in-depth responses, providing rich qualitative data (Jordan et al., 2021; Philip et al., 2021; Russell & Coventry, 2020; Shoebotham & Coulson, 2016). During the interviews, I asked additional questions to obtain new and valuable information from the participants. Throughout each interview, I carefully observed, recorded, and reflected on my observations.

A standardized set of predetermined questions was utilized for all participants in the study to maintain consistency in the interview process. Participants were allowed to familiarize themselves with and discuss the interview protocol to enhance their comfort level during the interviews. The interviewer took measures to be well-acquainted with these questions, avoiding

dependence on reading them verbatim from the guide. Each interview concluded with

expressions of gratitude from the researcher towards the participants for their valuable

contribution. The interview guide and protocol underwent a thorough review and received

approval from the researcher's doctoral committee members. Committee members provided

feedback that I incorporated into the final interview protocol. Before participating in the

interviews, all study participants completed an informed consent form as required.

**Table 1**

*Participant Overview Table*

| Pseudonym | Age | Gender | Ethnicity | Year in school/ professional career | Number of transitions reported |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Participant 1 | 31 | M | African American | 1 | 4–5 |
| Participant 2 | 35 | M | Caucasian | 1 | 4–5 |
| Participant 3 | 33 | F | African American | 1 | 5 |
| Participant 4 | 30 | F | African American | 1 | 10–11 |
| Participant 5 | 32 | F | African American | 1 | 3 |
| Participant 6 | 25 | F | Caucasian | 1 | 6 |
| Participant 7 | 44 | F | African American | 1 | 6 |
| Participant 8 | 27 | F | Caucasian | 1 | 10 |
| Participant 9 | 40 | F | Mix Races | 1 | 5 |
| Participant 10 | 48 | F | Caucasian | 1 | 19 |

**Interviews in Interpretative Phenomenology**

Interviews in interpretative phenomenology research aim to explore individuals' lived

experiences and perspectives to gain insight into the essence and meaning of their experiences.

Researchers have recognized the need to further examine the compatibility of IPA and other

qualitative research approaches to enhance the methodological rigor and validity of the findings

(Choi et al., 2018; Lensvelt et al., 2021; Ong, 2020; Rolfes & Owen, 2017). This study

investigated the cultural aspects of transitioning into foster care and receiving educational

support among former foster youth. The analysis focused on participants' lived experiences in the

foster care system. The transcribed interviews were analyzed using interpretative

phenomenological analysis, an inductive approach. IPA allows the researcher to closely examine

and interpret the participant's personal views, perceptions, and accounts rather than aiming for an

objective description of events (James et al., 2020; Meskó et al., 2019; Nieves & Recillo, 2021;

Vainberg et al., 2019). Conducting individualized interviews facilitated discussions and provided

a solution to the research problem by collecting personal narratives that were specific to each

participant's cultural context.

IPA researchers often find individual interviews to be advantageous as they allow for a

more in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, consolidating a more extensive range of

insights into a smaller number of data collection events (Philip et al., 2021; Young et al., 2021).

Interviewing individuals in qualitative research provides a rich source of data that allows for a

deep understanding of their experiences, beliefs, and perceptions (Cemaloğlu & Duran, 2018;

Elssalih, 2021; Richards et al., 2023). In some situations, individual interviews can elicit a more

detailed and nuanced understanding of participants' experiences compared to group interviews

(Freeman et al., 2020; Philip et al., 2021).

Furthermore, individual interviews in interpretative phenomenology research align with

the principles of IPA, which recognizes the importance of exploring and interpreting the unique

perceptions and meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences (James et al., 2020;

Roose & Endawi, 2022; Sapam & Jijina, 2020). Various factors influence participant narratives,

including the interviewer's inquiries and responses, the extent to which participants share

experiences, and their sensitivity toward the topic. A culturally responsive interview

methodology in qualitative research is crucial in fostering shared understanding among

participants. In this study, incorporating cultural responsiveness involves acknowledging the

impact of culture (explicitly considering race and gender) on the participants' experiences in navigating transitions within foster care. Incorporating technological innovations was crucial in establishing an environment where the individuals participating in this research felt secure and comfortable enough to openly express their personal experiences. I created a comfortable environment by leveraging virtual platforms during the two-stage interview process, allowing participants to freely engage and share their stories.

**Two-Phase Interview Process**

I established a strong trust and rapport with the study participants by engaging in a comprehensive two-phase interview process; this allowed me to effectively capture and document their individual lived experiences without feeling pressured by time restraints. The first phase of the interview process involved conducting initial interviews with each participant to gather in-depth information about their experiences. The sequential method effectively mitigated anxiety or apprehensions among participants regarding the comprehensive documentation of their unique life experiences through two personalized discussions. Participants knew our discussions could extend beyond the initial interviews, prompting them to take their time. Consequently, this approach allowed the participants to provide comprehensive and detailed responses to the questions raised during both stages of the interview process.

*Phase 1: Introductions to Transitions*

During Phase 1, the initial interview with former foster youth centered on their firsthand experiences as older individuals in foster care and involved discussing their thoughts and perspectives on transitioning while being part of the foster care system. I commenced with an open and unrestricted conversation to foster a comfortable environment for participants to initiate the initial phase of interviews. This approach encouraged them to freely express their thoughts

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and feelings in response to any inquiries posed without facing interruptions during their discourse. There was no specific order in which the participants responded. The interviews occurred during two sessions, with a 2-week gap between each session. For accurate documentation, I used the Zoom recording feature during both meetings, a feature visible to all participants and displayed as a *recording* on their computer screens. Giving online interviews ensured a visual reminder of the recording taking place, which helped maintain transparency and trust throughout the interview process. Online interviews can be beneficial for various reasons, such as convenience, accessibility, and the ability to easily record and transcribe conversations for analysis (Menegatto et al., 2022; Turcotte-Tremblay et al., 2021). I chose a set of 13 interview questions, which included opportunities for re-introductions and an icebreaker. The purpose of the icebreaker was to establish rapport with each participant before conducting the interviews. It involved asking participants about their well-being and positive experiences during the week leading up to the interview. Following the completion of introductions, participants responded to a series of inquiries throughout two subsequent interviews (Appendix A).

*Phase 2: Education and Hardships*

In Phase 2, I interviewed former foster youth to gather information about their experiences with transitioning regarding education. The interviews began by reminding them of their consent and allowed for a comfortable environment where they could share more details as the conversation progressed. Conducting interviews with individuals regarding their educational experiences can yield valuable insights (Alazemi & Alazemi, 2021; Niu & Niemi, 2019; Schoeb & Chong, 2019). Interviews allow the researcher to understand the unique challenges and opportunities foster youth face in their educational journeys. The interviews were designed to gather data on the impact of maltreatment on academic achievement among foster youth

(Morton, 2015). The participants responded to questions about their experiences with maltreatment and its impact on their academic achievement. The purpose of conducting phase two interviews with former foster youth was to gather information about their experiences with transitioning regarding education and to understand the impact of maltreatment.

### *Technological Advances and Approaches to Online Interviewing*

I used synchronous online individual interviews as the primary method of data collection. Synchronous online interviews allow for real-time interaction between the interviewer and participants, simulating a face-to-face interview experience (Desai et al., 2020; Frizzo et al., 2022; Iniesto et al., 2021; Rahimi & Khazir, 2019). The use of online interviews provided several advantages in this study. Firstly, it eliminated geographical barriers, allowing for the inclusion of participants from different locations. Secondly, it provided a convenient and flexible data collection method for the participants and the researcher. Lastly, online interviews minimized potential disruptions caused by external factors such as travel or scheduling conflicts. Facilitating the initiation of online interview discussions with prompts that invite participants to introduce themselves promotes a sense of cohesion within the conversations (Hansen et al., 2021; Qamar & Child, 2021). Virtual interviews occurred using the Zoom online platform. Participants received an invitation with a link to join the interview at the scheduled time. Before the interview, participants were provided with a copy of the project summary sheet and consent form to ensure informed consent. Throughout the interviews, I ensured that my workspace was organized and tidy. I provided clear instructions on navigating the Zoom platform verbally and in the chat function. This methodology aimed to gather comprehensive data for later analysis and reporting purposes about the study's findings.

**Data Analysis Strategies**

Data analysis for this study involved several steps. An essential aspect to consider in qualitative research is the analysis of data, which influences how a researcher presents their findings, engages in discussions, draws conclusions, and identifies implications from the data (Bachman et al., 2021; Moloney et al., 2023). Before conducting the data analysis, the researcher reviewed Huberman and Saldana's (2020) five main objectives for presenting data: exploration, description, organization, explanation, and prediction. While analyzing the study's data, I called on Saldaña's (2020) approach, which presented three distinct purposes in qualitative research.

- To explore the roles of codes, coding, and analytic memo writing in collecting and analyzing qualitative data.

- To present diverse coding methods commonly used in qualitative data analysis while considering their applicability to various research contexts.

- To give readers sources, explanations, suggested uses, examples, and exercises to help them code and analyze qualitative data effectively (Saldaña, 2020, p. 1).

First, I transcribed all interview recordings to ensure accuracy and enable a close examination of the data. Next, a coding framework was developed based on the interview's research questions and themes. I applied the thematic data coding framework to the transcriptions, assigning each piece of data a relevant code. After coding the data, I conducted a thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes within the dataset, which involved grouping similar codes and analyzing the relationships between different themes. The thematic analysis helped to identify key findings and extract meaningful insights from the data collected during the interviews (Güeita-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Khalaf et al., 2013). NVIVO facilitated the management and support of the coding and analysis process (Bazeley & Jackson, 2019). A

systematic process is essential for analyzing the specific elements in an Interpretative

Phenomenological Analysis study (Hansen et al., 2015; Liao et al., 2021; Przybyla et al., 2020).

The initial phase of the procedure involves transcribing each interview verbatim and organizing

the data for subsequent analysis (Burgess & Ramsey-Stewart, 2014; Engdahl et al., 2020). Phase

2 entails carefully reviewing the interview transcripts and audio recordings, taking note of any

valuable information to delve into and interpret further.

The subsequent phase involves meticulously examining the participants' dialogue,

focusing on their words and underlying meanings. I generated codes by identifying

commonalities and discrepancies in the dialogue expressed by all participants (Gillespie et al.,

2015; Schmidt et al., 2017). The primary objective was to comprehend the participants' lived

experiences, grasp their perspectives, and emphasize the process of creating meaning within

specific contexts. I then labeled the meanings as codes for further analysis. To analyze the

transcript and identify codes, a thorough examination of each interview was conducted. I

carefully reviewed the transcripts to identify noteworthy observations or linguistic comments on

the research questions. By using colored sticky notes, labels, pens, and markers, similarities and

differences between codes were visually represented for further analysis. Codes in research help

to categorize and organize data, providing a way to analyze the information obtained from

interviews systematically (Gillespie et al., 2015; Ribeiro et al., 2018; Saldaña, 2020).

### *Identify Emergent and Subordinate Themes*

Through coding and analysis, distinct patterns emerged in the data. I categorized the

patterns into themes that related to one another. In an IPA study, developing themes based on

each interview is essential. In IPA studies, theme counting is not typically conducted (Halvorsen

et al., 2016). I also arranged the themes chronologically based on similarities, differences, shared

characteristics, and subtle variations. During the analysis, I progressed from specific observations to identifying overarching themes by examining convergence, divergence, commonalities, and subtleties to capture emergent patterns. In studies using IPA, the categories are commonly referred to as superordinate themes due to the focus on identifying specific elements and consolidating them into overarching themes (Halvorsen et al., 2016; Love et al., 2020). This approach avoids a mere tallying of individual themes.

*Data Representation*

The data analysis involved the collection of personal narratives, coding, and the creation of thematic descriptions. In line with IPA guidelines, this approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of individuals' lived experiences, adaptability considering new insights, and robust justification for our findings. We incorporated input from participants throughout the process and encouraged ongoing interpretation by all contributors to ensure an accurate representation of the data (Bartels et al., 2022; Carretier et al., 2020; Harf et al., 2015). The data presentation features of IPA are significant as they delineate the connection between the participants and their process of interpreting their experiences. The representation of data demonstrates how interpretation can be methodically and implicitly constructed within lived encounters (Cole et al., 2020; Maybery et al., 2020).

The data representation in this study involved a meticulous examination of the participants' claims, concerns, and understandings conveyed through selected excerpts from the transcriptions presented in Chapter Four. Through engaging in a dialogue with the participants, the researcher gains insights into their experiences within the context of the phenomenon. This conversation facilitates a more comprehensive and interpretive understanding, allowing for an accurate representation of their accounts (Lestari et al., 2021; Shirani et al., 2022). The

interaction facilitated the researcher in constructing an interpretive understanding of how participants attributed meaning to their emotions and experiences. Subsequently, this led to the formulating of a comprehensive narrative accompanied by a meticulous examination of data excerpts portraying participants' reactions toward each inquiry. Finally, I engaged in follow-up conversations with participants to ensure the accuracy of the data presented in my comprehensive analysis of the study's results and findings. During these dialogues, I posed additional inquiries regarding any uncertainties or areas where further clarification was needed.

## Assurances of Confidentiality and Ethical Issues

### *Member Checking, Confirmability, Dependability*

I employed several measures to ensure this study's credibility and ethical integrity. First, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they were fully aware of the purpose and scope of the study and their rights as participants. Additionally, I maintained strict confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. I adhered to the principles of member checking, which involves sharing the initial findings with participants and allowing them to provide feedback or validate the interpretations made by the researcher. Member checking helped to enhance the confirmability and dependability of the study's findings by ensuring they accurately reflected the participants' perspectives and that interpretations aligned with their experiences. I also considered ethical considerations such as respect for the participants and their rights, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and transparency.

### *Transferability, Credibility, Authenticity*

Transferability, or the extent to which the findings of a study apply to other contexts or settings, was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the participant characteristics, research methods, and data collection procedures. This information allows readers to assess the

applicability of the findings to their contexts. I also sought to establish credibility throughout the study using multiple data collection methods, such as interviews and observations, which allowed for triangulation of findings. Additionally, the researcher engaged in prolonged engagement with the participants, spending significant time in their environment to gain a deep understanding of their experiences. Moreover, the researcher maintained extensive and detailed field notes to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. Authenticity was emphasized by maintaining transparency about the research process and acknowledging potential biases or limitations. The researcher also took measures to ensure the reliability and validity of the study. I achieved reliability through consistent data collection procedures and adherence to a structured research design (Grasmo et al., 2021; Price-Howard & Lewis, 2022).

### *Assumptions of Study*

I implemented various measures to ensure the trustworthiness of this study and obtain credible findings. I assumed the participants would provide sincere and accurate responses regarding their experiences transitioning into foster care. Potential biases and personal experiences were acknowledged but managed objectively throughout the research process by recognizing my background as a former foster youth.

### Summary

The methodological approach chosen for this study was a qualitative inquiry. To provide transparency, I shared my researcher's positionality and how it impacts the inquiry. The research design utilized was IPA (interpretative phenomenological analysis). I used Schlossberg's transition theory to incorporate storytelling into the gathered data. I revisited the study's research problem and questions, explaining how purposeful sampling facilitated participant selection. I described the research site and the data collection, management, and analysis approaches.

Concepts of academic rigor and trustworthiness facilitated acknowledgment of confidentiality and ethical issues.

By interpreting and analyzing the participants' perspectives and experiences, I obtained valuable insight into socialization processes and sources of support for the phenomenon under investigation. This interpretation and analysis will address the gap in current scholarship regarding the firsthand experiences of older youth in foster care. Completing each transcript involved a thorough review by the researcher to ensure the accurate capture of all interview details. A member-checking process occurred, where participants reviewed and provided feedback on the final transcription document to enhance the study's reliability.

As we move forward to the next chapter, I am honored to present my daily opportunity to collaborate with these remarkable and resilient individuals who have emerged from foster care. The participants' stories and accounts provided profound insight. I invite readers to attentively understand the distinct challenges older youth face transitioning from foster care into education, recognizing their tremendous resilience throughout this journey. My only hope is that you brace yourself and buckle up because of this rollercoaster of transformational experience for former foster youth. Here's a look into our experiences of former older youth as they experienced foster care. Without further ado, I present to you, my fellow former foster youth brothers and sisters!

# Chapter 4 - Findings

Chapter 4 explores the difficulties older youth perceive as they navigate transitioning out of state care. This research employed a qualitative approach by interviewing individuals previously in foster care. By exploring the experiences of young adults during their transition within the foster care system, I aimed to provide a comprehensive examination of their journey. Chapter 4 analyzes the data collected from ten individual interviews and researcher journals. The findings emerged through a careful analysis of the gathered information. I based the data analysis on my interpretation of methods outlined by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Saldaña (2020) for thematic analysis. Themes and patterns within the participants' experiences emerged using interpretive phenomenological analysis, a research approach focusing on understanding individual lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). I emphasized active collaboration between me and the 10 participants and acknowledged that knowledge is co-constructed through this collaborative process. Verbatim transcriptions emerged from individual interviews to accurately reflect and respect the experiences of participants in foster care. This approach was adopted to acknowledge and valorize the invaluable insights individuals acquired while navigating various transitions within the foster care system. The objective was to accurately depict the participants' viewpoints, convictions, and emotions to maintain the authenticity of the research.

**Phenomenological Interpretations Used in Analysis**

I present the findings through a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the participants' interviews and the researcher's journals. A Schlossbergian phenomenological lens facilitated an in-depth understanding of the experiences reported by the participants. In the analysis process, social cognitive theory, social learning theory, and general strain theory helped to interpret the data, an approach consistent with the emergence of themes identified during

individual interviews to ensure that the data analysis focused on the unique perspectives of each participant. Following each segment, an interpretive analysis examines the similarities, differences, shared experiences, and subtle distinctions between the participants' and researcher's encounters with socialization and support. IPA ensured my involvement as a collaborator with the participants, aiming to generate an analysis for this study. A free-flowing questioning technique was employed during each interview, encompassing the initial and second interviews conducted over a Zoom call. The data analysis includes excerpts from verbatim transcriptions to support each of the identified themes and honor the perspectives of both participants and the researcher. Including the perspectives of participants and researcher journals greatly enhances the findings of this study. This approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions, offering rich details that might not have been possible otherwise.

## The Research Questions and Resulting Themes

The following research questions provided the guidelines for this study:

RQ1. How did former foster youth describe their initial experiences with foster home transitions?

RQ2. How did former foster youth describe the navigation of high school while transitioning to new homes?

### Theme Coverage and Research Alignment

The thematic coding process yielded seven emergent themes that capture different aspects of the research topic (Table 1). Four themes emerged from RQ1 and three from RQ2. The percentages associated with each theme provide insight into the extent to which different topics were addressed in the data, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the various aspects examined in the research.

**Table 2**

*RQ and Theme Alignment Table*

| Research question | Theme | Quotes | Percent of RQ-aligned total | Percent of total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| RQ1 | Theme 1. Challenges in Adapting to New Environments | 97 | 36.3% | 24.5% |
| | Theme 2. Seeking Stability Amidst Change | 96 | 36.0% | 24.2% |
| | Theme 3. Influence of Supportive Figures on Positive Growth | 45 | 16.9% | 11.4% |
| | Theme 4. Navigating Family Ties and Connections | 29 | 10.9% | 7.3% |
| RQ2 | Theme 5. Self-driven Academic Pursuits Amidst Uncertainty | 50 | 38.8% | 12.6% |
| | Theme 6. Navigating the Dual Realities of Academics and Emotional Turmoil | 46 | 35.7% | 11.6% |
| | Theme 7. Shaping Social Identity Amidst Foster Care Stigmas | 33 | 25.6% | 8.3% |

*Theme 1: Challenges in Adapting to New Environments*

**Discomfort in New Homes and Working to Fit In.** This theme describes the experiences of discomfort, efforts to fit into new homes, reluctance, distrust towards caregivers, and challenges in establishing new relationships. Participant 1 shared a concise account of a positive experience during the transition to a new placement and some initial challenges encountered on the first day. They stated:

I am in your home, and we are arriving there. We get to do a formal introduction. I'm aware that people were already there before I arrived. We get to introduce ourselves to the other kids in the home. We attempt to spend quality time to get to know each other better over time. But the very first day is basically more of an introduction, you know, trying to get people's names down and stuff like that.

This participant highlighted the significgance of exchanging crucial information inorder to best understand a new cargiver and environment.

Participant 2, on the other hand, provided a broader perspective on transitioning into a new placement, recognizing the risk of feeling like an outsider, the effort required to adapt through a gradual process, and the lack of attention given to him during that time in his life. Participant 2 explained:

> Adapting to a different foster home was not easy. You see different people, different risks, and other things unmentioned as well. I tried as much as possible to just have good behavior. It was just a gradual process of moving from one home to another. At some point, even with good behavior, some challenges do occur. And you try and see how you can bring some kind of remedy to the problem. The problem is often transition itself. When I was moved, there was a high number of people around me. No one ever paid proper attention; proper attention was never given to me.

Participant 4 expressed discomfort and unease while navigating the process of adapting to a new environment, reporting struggling with the unfamiliarity of their surroundings and facing difficulties in establishing a sense of belonging and comfort. Participant 4 discussed the process leading to labeling and sibling separation.

> It was very uncomfortable, actually. I always got treated like an outcast, and they always had me feeling unwanted. They labeled me as a problem child due to the mini separations with my siblings and the other transitions from moving from house to house.

Participant 4 emphasized the emotional aspects of daily transitions and the importance of effective communication for success. Participant 4 highlighted the potential effects of relocation

on an individual's mental state and overall well-being, particularly when they consistently experience feelings of being unwanted.

Sad, mad, frustrated, deranged. I felt like I was going crazy a little bit, too; as a child, going from house to house can really affect a person mentally. I guess if you're not in the situation or have never gone through it, you would never know. They don't understand how moving from house to house affects us mentally. I definitely felt unwanted. There's nothing anybody can do to change that.

Participant 5 also shared their unease in adapting to a different foster home. In Participant 5's experience, transitioning to a new foster home was accompanied by frustration and worry. Participant 5 discussed the concerns about having no family around. Participant 5 explained:

It was hard for me because I didn't know anyone, and then I went to a place that [was] unfamiliar with people who I didn't know. It's just very scary because they're not your family members or anything like that; it's just a random person. So, just going through the process of being separated and having to constantly move from home to home and worry about my safety was really a concern; very frustrating. You're in a house with strangers that you don't know, and that is what it looks like the very next day post-transition. There is a consistent worry [about] are these people going to like me? Am I safe? How do I go about communicating with these people? I have no idea.

Participant 6 mentioned the need for transparency to ensure placement in a location that is the best fit. Participant 6 highlighted the potential challenge of losing one's sense of self within the system without being provided with opportunities to flourish. Participant 6 stated:

I lost myself in foster care. I was confused, lost in fact. I'm not going to say they didn't care, but I feel like they didn't care. I feel like they just wanted to place me somewhere and not really place me in a place that fit me.

Several participants disclosed being lost in foster care and feeling alone. Participants stated that there was a lack of connectivity with intial guardians and that confusion was unavoidable.

**Distrust and reluctance toward foster Parents and Case Workers.** Participant 6 conveyed apprehension and doubt regarding the caregivers assigned to her in their foster homes. Participant 6 conveyed a sense of doubt and hesitation toward foster parents and case workers. Furthermore, Participant 6 provided additional insights into the influence of adult perspectives on trust among foster youth. Participant 6 explained:

I just feel like they really didn't understand; they don't understand foster kids. They don't know how it is now, but [in] my experience, they really weren't understanding people. I don't know how to explain it; it just felt like I wasn't heard, I felt like they couldn't relate to me or really understand what I was going through at the time. They just need more people in the system to understand what kids go through because there's no kid that is bad. Children can act bad, or children cannot act bad; it's about what they are going through that can mold them into looking like a statistic. Some adults look at people like statistics; they'll tell you all these kids are going to end up like this or that. I felt like getting out of foster care because I had a point to prove to the system, if that makes sense.

Participant 6 emphasized the need to keep one's guard up when interacting with foster parents and case workers, highlighting a general sense of skepticism and mistrust towards these individuals.

I really had my guard up; it was hard trusting people just like that. They know about me.

They told them everything about me, but I don't know nothing about them. I don't even

know their names. I had to get to know them through them.

In addition, Participant 7 revealed that foster youths often face the challenge of limited

knowledge about their foster parents upon placement. As a result, they may feel cautious and

keep them at arm's length until trust emerges. This delicate dynamic can resemble walking on

eggshells to protect themselves from potential disappointment or harm. Participant 7 stated:

Your body is walking on eggshells, trying to get to know you. You're weird, and you're in

their house, and it's uncomfortable. I wish that foster homes themselves would have gone

to our therapy sessions and stuff like that with us. Maybe they would know more about

our background and things that we're into. Things like she is adventurous, or she is kind

of a shy, quiet type. They don't put details like that in our transfer paperwork.

Participant 7 also highlighted the challenges of investing effort into fostering

relationships that do not appear to have long-term stability.

I don't form relationships with any and every person that I see if I know that it's going to

be long-term. They're not going to continue to be around. They're going to leave me alone

in a couple of years anyway, so why bother making a relationship?

Participant 9 discussed the significance of their surroundings and the value of developing

an attachment to a place instead of prioritizing making others feel at ease. Participant 9 stated:

I think usually my intermediate thought was, OK, I'll just go in and get a lay of the land

and see whether or not I have to be more of a chameleon and figure out where I fit into

this place to adjust accordingly.

Participant 3 expressed that foster youth often feel unheard when they desire to leave an unsatisfactory situation. Participant 3 expressed frustration with feeling unheard and ignored, resulting in behaving differently and potentially leading to further negative labeling. Participant 3 stated:

I didn't really want to be there anymore, and I kept telling him that I wanted to leave. They didn't believe me and did not do anything about it. But I guess they got tired of you talking about it, and we're like, OK, fine, I'll let you know when you can leave after we talk to your case manager. By that time, I was working with my fifth case manager.

Participant 10 emphasized that the most expedient approach to request a new placement would be if they perceive their current situation as unsafe or lacking support. Participant 10 highlighted the possibility of foster parents exhibiting inappropriate or abusive behavior. Participant 10 stated:

My first foster home was awful. They weren't abusive, but my foster father was inappropriate towards me. I didn't feel that I was in a safe position. I was very mature for my age, and he flirted with me a lot.

**Challenges of Establishing Relationships in New Homes and Communities.** Many respondents expressed that one of the primary obstacles they encountered when transitioning to new foster homes was forming connections with their foster families and communities. Participant 8 expressed the challenge of cultivating trust and vulnerability with new adults, particularly in light of the environment foster care group homes offer. Participant 8 noted:

Living with that many girls was really tough. Do you have all the hormones and periods and you just have to live with the fact that you have a lot going on in one house with a

bunch of other girls? You don't even really know all of the staff, some of them were nice however, some of them were just there for a job.

Participants 9 and 3 also discussed the challenges of building meaningful connections with adults and communities in the presence of numerous other children in their placement. Participants 9 and 3 emphasized the transient nature of their experiences in foster care, which made it difficult for them to view people in their lives as long-term relationships. Participant 9 stated:

I think I only had one foster home, and the rest were all group homes. So, it wasn't like I was really bonded with any family units most of the time. If I had to pick an emotion to attach to this time, I would say confusion.

Participant 3 explained:

I was in about five different foster homes back and forth during that time. Establishing a connection with anyone with that amount of transitioning was really hard. When I finally got to a more long-term situation, I fell asleep and woke up to my placement provider's kids staring at me because they had never seen hair like mine.

Participant 3 emphasized the significance of being placed with a caregiver who shares similar religious beliefs and practices as their own. Participant 3 stated, "I went to church, and they had a church in which I was the only black kid; this was weird to me."

Certain individuals expressed the discovery and cultivation of strong bonds during their journey through foster care. Participant 3 highlighted the importance of having a supportive and understanding foster family:

I didn't want to participate in anything they wanted me to participate in. And they were very respectful and understanding of that. I could tell they were trying to be nice. I think

that's why I continue to talk to them to this day. They are the only ones; I didn't have any good relationships with any other foster families.

**Theme 1 Summary.** The findings suggest that older youth in foster care face challenges in developing and maintaining meaningful connections with adults and communities. These challenges link to the transient nature of their experiences, the presence of multiple children in their placements, and the lack of familiarity or shared experiences with their caregivers. Participants 9 and 3 faced challenges building meaningful connections with adults and communities due to the transient nature of their experiences in foster care. This finding supports previous research highlighting foster youth's difficulties in creating and maintaining positive relationships. The participants' experiences in multiple foster homes and group homes hindered their ability to develop long-term relationships. Additionally, Participant 3 highlighted the impact of cultural differences on their ability to form connections, specifically regarding religious practices and racial identity. Furthermore, the study findings indicate that stable kinship placements may provide a more supportive environment for foster youth than non-relative foster placements.

*Theme 2: Seeking Stability Amidst Change*

This theme emphasizes the importance of stability and continuity while acknowledging the challenges faced due to frequent changes and inadequate support in caregiving.

**The Importance of Consistency and the Strain of Frequent Changes.** Regarding the subject matter, the absence of consistency in caregiving links to various negative consequences, such as unfavourable long-term housing outcomes. This topic was a significant focus in Theme 2 discussions. Participant 1 emphasized the duration of time needed to relocate and adjust to a different setting, stating:

Moving to a new place most of the time takes at least a month to adapt to. When you're getting used to a new environment, it's quite hard. Emotionally, I was not OK because a new environment is stressful. Sometimes I couldn't sleep because I was scared.

Participant 2 discussed the differences in placements and their impact on their overall well-being, stating, "Each placement is different from the next you know. They all have their own rules and procedures and family structures to navigate. Also, all families have different routines, and that makes life hard." Participant 8 echoed participants 2's sentiments to include additional strains on schooling, stating:

I mean, each placement was pretty much different than every other placement. They all have their own rules, procedures, and structures that they follow. Eventually, everybody falls into a similar routine when it comes to completing the day-to-day stuff. [I] wish there was more support for the individuals [who] suffered in school and struggle with attentiveness. The moving made it hard to succeed in class and led to a lot of frustration.

Participants 9 and 4 also highlighted the strain placed on inconsistent education and academic performance. Success in school appeared unpredictable and challenging due to the constant changes in placement and schools. Participant 4 stated, "I didn't get a chance to graduate on time because I was bouncing from house to house." Participant 9 echoed that sentiment, stating:

With all the moving, I had fallen about a year behind. I had no option but to attend an alternative school where I hoped I could catch up and speed up the pace so that I could graduate on time.

Given the considerable number of youths in foster care, it is evident that there is a shortage of available foster parents and resources to adequately cater to their needs. This

shortage contributes to the high frequency of placement changes and the subsequent lack of stability experienced by many youths in care. Participant 3 explained:

> There are just not enough places for people to go, and there are not enough options for kids to pick from. I wish that something could be done to change this; however, in time, you begin to realize that this is the case and live with the fact that the odds are stacked against you.

Participant insights highlighted the impact of inconsistent housing experiences on the emotional well-being and academic performance of foster youth.

**Transportation.** One major issue arising from the frequent changes in foster care placements is how youth move from one location to another. These transportation disruptions can significantly negatively impact foster youth's self-esteem. Participants 7 and 3 mentioned poor treatment during moves. Participant 7 stated, "Trash bags, duffel bags, Walmart bags. I mean, seriously, if there was a bag available, something was placed in it. It didn't matter if they were trash bags or not moving objects, moving objects, no matter the value." Participant 3 continued that though, explaining:

> Kids don't have suitcases; they carry stuff in trash bags. A standard pick-up and drop-off situation. It just feels cold. The first thing I would do for kids in this situation would be get some suitcases or traveling bags. That's like the standard. Walking around with things and a trash bag is essentially saying look at me. I have a bunch of stuff and clothes in a trash bag. I'm a foster kid. That's ridiculous.

**Giving a Voice to the Voiceless.** This evidence highlights the necessity for structural reforms in the foster care system to ensure that the perspectives of foster youth are acknowledged and considered. Participant 4 explained:

It was never just enough to go and pack your clothes; you couldn't help but wonder, what

did I do? Because I was labeled a problem child, it was always you who did something

wrong. No one asked me if something happened to me. Or whether or not I was feeling

uncomfortable, whether or not something happened to me or was somebody touching me.

My caseworker didn't even ask me, are you OK? It simply, let's go. I never had an option.

What a foster home I would go to. I still wanted to be loved.

Participant 5 stated:

So, a lot of the time, knowing where I was going to go next wasn't even an option. I was

just placed somewhere where the state that I would be safe. I would recommend talking

to the foster child or attempting a one-on-one conversation. Make them understand. Why

are you doing what you're doing? Give them the ability to explore before placing them.

And always make sure the foster home is safe. Don't assume anything.

Participant 9 emphasized the lack of knowledge about their future destinations and the

absence of opportunities to bid farewell to people and places they leave behind. Participant 9

stated, "It can be pretty abrupt. So, you don't [have] sufficient time to say your goodbyes. A little

more warning will probably go a long way."

**A Lack of Resources and/or Support During Care and When Aging Out.** These

participant statements highlight the challenges foster youth face regarding lack of resources and

support during their time in care and when they age out of the system. Participant 4 explained:

They asked me, are you ready to age out, or do you want to stay until you're 21? I said

no, ma'am, I'm ready to go. Who wants to stay in a facility until they turn 21? I didn't turn

back, I didn't look back, I didn't ask questions, I was gone. After that, nobody reached out

to me or anything. I feel like I could've prepared a bit better before exiting. They never

asked me exactly what I wanted to do with my life. To guide me down the right path. I kind of feel like the system let me down. I definitely could've used more resources.

Participants 6, 7, and 10 emphasized the support they received from the state upon leaving care and expressed their desire for additional resources to prevent financial challenges and involvement in criminal activities. Participant 6 explained:

I was responsible for keeping an actual copy of my birth certificate and Social Security card. These were the actual real documents that I did not value at the time, and so I left them at a placement. This later came back to hurt me when someone at the placement used my documents to hurt my credit. They didn't teach me things like how to do my taxes or set up a checking account.

Participant 7 stated:

I didn't feel like I had any support and had to figure things out on my own. I had no clue what I was doing. I knew I would qualify for the Pell Grant. However, I didn't know that it wouldn't cover all my college expenses. I didn't even know that I was supposed to fill out a FASFA. I had to beg to borrow money and steal stuff to make things work.

Participant 10 stated:

Back then, they didn't have any resources for children aged out of foster care in the state of Tennessee. I aged out without an ID, a driver's license, or any proper documents to obtain an ID; I had no car or checking account. I was homeless for six months. I lived behind a gas station for about 2 to 3 months because it was close to a place where I knew I could get food stamps. A lady there told me that I wouldn't qualify for a house unless I had kids. The transition from foster care to adulthood was extremely difficult.

**Theme 2 Summary.** The findings suggest that many youths in foster care experience a lack of support and resources when transitioning into adulthood. This lack of support and resources can lead to financial, housing, education, and employment challenges. These challenges can contribute to negative outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment, and involvement in criminal activities. Agencies and systems must recognize and provide the resources and support foster youth need during their transition to adulthood to address their challenges.

*Theme 3: Influence of Supportive Figures on Positive Growth*

This theme describes the challenges related to maintaining family connections and relationships, especially siblings, during transitions in the foster system. Supportive figures, such as biological families and caregivers, play a crucial role in the positive growth of former foster youth as they transition to adulthood.

**Challenges and Issues Related to Family Connections.** Participants 1, 3, 4, and 5 emphasized their difficulties maintaining familial ties. These challenges arise due to the instability inherent in the foster care system, which often entails frequent placements and severed connections with their biological families. Participant 1 explained:

> The last time I saw my aunt was about two years ago. I saw her at a grocery store. She seemed happy to see me, and we exchanged contact information. Although we talk often, we don't have a bond. I met my mom and dad again two years ago. It was pretty uncomfortable.

Participant 4 emphasized that sometimes individuals have limited control over the loss of their connections and must strive to navigate from that point. Participant 4 expressed:

It seemed like the more I moved, the further away I got from my family. I ended up in the middle of the state in a park [that] seemed like nowhere. With this distance, I developed separation anxiety. I was in first place with my sisters, but then quickly, they went downhill; I went from both sisters to one sister and then from one sister to no sisters.

Participant 5 stated, "Initially, I was not allowed to go and live with relatives; I could understand why. I was at a foster home by myself without my siblings. It was very traumatizing." Participant 3 acknowledged that the efforts by the state to reunite siblings at a later stage in life may prove challenging due to the possibility of an already weakened bond; they stated:

So, my sister came to live with me years after I [had] already adjusted to a new environment. They asked me if she could stay, and I said I guess I didn't really care. I was done with foster care. It was my senior year, and I had already begun applying for colleges. It was kind of cool getting to work with her a little bit in the summer, though.

Participants 7 and 10 emphasized the importance of finding their siblings after leaving foster care, which has positively impacted their overall relationships. Participant 7 stated:

I was really close to my sister and thought about her during my entire time in foster care. As soon as I aged out, I moved to the state where she was placed. I was 19 when I was [in] foster care. Fixing my relationship with her has been a very positive thing in my life.

Participant 10 stated:

As soon as I aged out of foster care and got on my feet, I was able to go back and find my younger brother who was 16 at the time.

Participants 3 and 8 discussed their experiences in foster care, which resulted in developing a sense of mistrust toward others and among themselves. Participant 3 mentioned:

I still have a ton of feelings about what foster care did to my relationship with my

siblings. I still feel a lot of guilt, with a little relief. I am the reason that we came in the

first care in the first place. It was because of the report I made about our father at school

that turned out to be true. I always wanted to talk to my siblings more about this, but we

were never given the opportunity.

Participant 8 stated:

After being moved away from my siblings, I went on the run. I met a couple of females

who were not such great friends. I was actually being prosecuted by them, and they were

posting pictures of me on the Internet. A detective found me and arrested me for

prostitution.

**Power of Connectedness.** Participants 4 and 6 emphasized the significance of having

supportive connections and relationships during their transition process, providing them with

motivation and a sense of purpose. Participant 4 explained:

Sometimes, when my worker would come to pick me up because of something bad I did,

I knew I was going to jail. I knew when it came to trusting someone with [the] stuff that I

valued, it would be my aunt on my mother's side. I always loved and missed my brothers.

I was told if I did well in school and stayed out of trouble, I would be allowed to visit

them more often. They used my siblings as something to inspire me, kind of like

bargaining.

Participant 6 stated:

I'm not proud of some of the things that I did in order to see my mother because the

courts banned her from seeing me in the first place. I didn't care. I would run off to see

her whenever I could, and she would keep me for like a day or two before returning to be

back to my placement because she didn't want me to get in any trouble.

**Theme 3 Summary.** The findings suggest that former foster youth with supportive

connections and relationships with significant others, such as siblings, foster parents, and

biological parents, experience better developmental outcomes in adulthood than those without

these supports. These relationships provided stability, support, and a sense of connection during

the difficult transition from foster care to independent living. Having supportive connections can

also serve as a protective factor for former foster youth as they navigate adulthood, leading to

improved educational and employment outcomes. In addition, participant experiences suggested

that some former foster youth seek out their biological families for instrumental and emotional

support, even with terminated parental rights. Participant experiences also indicated that

maintaining relationships with biological parents and extended families during adulthood can

have benefits and costs. However, further research is needed to fully understand the complexities

of these relationships.

*Theme 4: Navigating Family Ties and Connections.*

Theme 4 describes the crucial role that positive, supportive figures play in the lives of

foster youth and how their guidance can lead to improved outcomes. Participant experiences

consistently highlight the importance of genuine and meaningful relationships between foster

caregivers and youth in foster care. Additionally, participants explained how foster parents,

educators, social work staff, and church members who served as helpful authority figures made a

positive difference in their lives. Participant 5 stated:

Yes, I made connections with many foster parents throughout my transitions because I

knew how important it was. Some of my foster parents were very helpful because it was

clear that they supported me. I remember feeling grateful because one of my foster moms was really nice. The family felt like a very loving family. They were probably the best parents I could wish for at the moment. Yes, they actually ended up adopting me. So, from then on, I called him my parents. She was actually a librarian [who] inspired me to want to go to college.

Participant 6 mentioned:

I still talk to my foster mom to this day. She was really good. I was with her for like 3 years when I was 13. I'm 21 now. Normally, when I was in foster care, I couldn't sleep. But with her, and I always felt at home, she made me feel comfortable. She gave me my own room. I would wake up, and she would make breakfast. She was hard-working

Participant 10 stated:

I remember my foster mother. Mainly my second foster mother. She was really adamant about me expressing myself and being able to pay it forward to somebody who may be less fortunate than I was. Someone who was going through a hard time because of things they were experiencing. She taught me important values that I carry with me to this day.

Participants 6, 8, 9, 3, and 10 emphasized the beneficial influence of additional supportive individuals during their time in foster care. These figures included educators, social work staff, and church members who played a significant role in their lives. Participant 6 stated, "The only person who really supported me throughout my whole time in foster care was my therapist. I still talk to her to this very day. She always made sure I was OK." Participant 8 added, "My last case worker is crucial for me. I enjoyed having her. We still talk to this day, and she even reaches out from time to time to make sure I'm still doing OK, even after 10 years." Participant 9 stated:

I live in a facility with people who you would call "House Parents" who were on duty 24

hours a day, 5 days a week. Their job was to watch over all the kids that lived in the

house when I was about 16. I became so close to these parents that, to this day, my kids

call him grandma and grandpa.

Participant 3 stated:

My school counselor gets a lot of credit in my book. She put together a portfolio or a

binder for me so that I could keep track of all of the things I was good at to show

potential colleges. This included recommendation letters and stuff like that. She was

amazing. She worked with another person called a youth specialist. They made sure that I

got to all of my college visits all the time and my doctors' appointments.

Participant 10 stated:

I found myself at the mercy of a Christian family right after aging out of foster care. They

were always there when I needed a helping hand. By the grace of God, they took me in

and allowed me to stay with them for a couple of months while I figured out how to

transition into beauty school. I don't think I would've ever made it without him. Before

that, I was homeless and just another statistic.

**Theme 4 Summary.** The findings suggest that supportive and caring authority figures,

such as educators, social work staff, and church members, can positively impact the lives of

foster youth by providing them with the support and guidance they need. These relationships can

continue even after the youth have aged out of foster care, providing a lasting source of support.

Positive relationships with adults can be valuable role models for foster youth who may lack

positive influences within their households. Additionally, supportive relationships with non-

parent adults also play a crucial role in the lives of foster youth, given that many lack positive

role models within their specific placements. These relationships can provide foster youth emotional support, encouragement, and guidance, contributing to positive developmental outcomes.

*Theme 5: Self-driven Academic Pursuits Amidst Uncertainty*

This theme describes foster youth's determination and resilience in navigating their educational journey. Despite the challenges presented by frequent transitions and lack of consistent support, these individuals showcased immense self-drive, often planning and taking proactive steps toward their academic goals.

**Overcoming Educational Challenges Through Self-Motivation and Planning.** Self-motivation has always played a crucial role in the academic success of foster youth. Participant 1 highlighted his passion for schooling and his drive to succeed despite the lack of support and resources. The participant highlighted the importance of setting personal goals, staying focused, and proactively seeking opportunities for academic growth. Participant 1 explains:

> I had a strong desire to pursue education, so I took the necessary steps to ensure that everything was in order for me to attend high school and make progress. However, initially, it was challenging for me to navigate meeting new people from different backgrounds. Nevertheless, I eventually learned how to adapt and overcome these challenges.

Similarly, Participant 5 also expressed a strong passion for education and the pursuit of knowledge as instrumental in surmounting obstacles within her academic journey. She underscored the significance of self-drive, maintaining a goal-oriented mindset, and actively striving to maintain high grades; she explained:

Sure, so I think one of my biggest strengths was my education, like being able to excel and achieve, getting my grades up, and making A's and B's. So, honestly, I was very smart when it came to making sure I got my school tasks done and my work done.

The comments made by the participant also show a determination to overcome challenges to make academic progress. Participant 3 highlighted their perseverance and the need to overcome difficulties during their junior year of high school to succeed academically. Participant 3 mentioned:

I will say I ended up going to summer school like my new year, I had to go to summer school to make up some science credits. And then, at one point, I was just like, screw it, I'll just do a whole bunch of courses. And then I was ahead of the schedule after a while. But I did have to put in a lot of effort to catch up and be where I was supposed to be when I went to all the different schools that I went to.

Participant 3 also emphasized their strong resolve to overcome educational obstacles by staying focused on the task and not allowing personal circumstances to hinder their success. Participant 3 stated:

I told myself a long time ago that I was going to go to college, and that had always been my goal. College was always my home, and I wasn't going to let foster care not allow me to do that. So, I did everything that I needed to get into college. The ability to self-motivate and prioritize education played a significant role in participants' academic success.

**Adapting to the Highs and Lows.** Participant 8 shared her experiences pursuing her academic goals, revealing the successes and obstacles she encountered throughout her journey. Participant 8 highlighted the importance of adaptability and resilience in navigating the highs

and lows of her academic pursuits. Participant 8 mentioned, "I had moments where I was motivated and focused on education, but there were also times when I felt overwhelmed and discouraged." Participant 8 also emphasized perseverance, pushing past tough times, and staying committed to her educational goals; they explained:

I guess, but I would say I'm very happy with what I did; I ended up graduating early and walking with my class. Because at that rate I was going, I wasn't going to graduate at all. So, to accomplish that and get my diploma was something I'm very proud of. And then I am here today at 26 in my second semester of college and doing good. So, education has been OK, I want to say, like a roller coaster ride.

Navigating the challenges and changes of transitioning to higher education is a shared journey for numerous students. Individuals need to cultivate resilience and maintain a positive mindset throughout this process. Participant 6 highlighted the importance of adaptability in successfully navigating the challenges of transitioning to higher education. The participant's comments reflected a willingness to embrace change and seek out support when needed, stating, "Mentally, I've just always been strong headed. I really don't think negative. And the situation, I always look for a positive outcome." Adaptability is a crucial skill that participants highlighted when discussing their experiences transitioning throughout education.

**Pursuits Beyond High School and Survival.** Participant 7 emphasized the impact that immediate needs can have on academic pursuits. This participant spoke to the lack of education on preparation surrounding academic funding vs. real-life funding, which can create a major roadblock for foster youth trying to navigate their educational journey. Participant 7 explains:

My plan was to go to med school, Friedman school, and all that great jazz. But I didn't end up graduating when I was supposed to. I ended up getting out of foster care, and then

I ended up graduating after I left foster care [for] a program here in Kansas. Upon enrolling at ESU, I quickly realized that balancing work and school simultaneously was not feasible. Ensuring my own survival took precedence over pursuing education. Consequently, my decisions were guided by the necessity to survive rather than what would be most beneficial in the long run.

Participant 9 prioritized immediate survival rather than pursuing further academic pursuits. However, through self-motivation and determination, she overcame this obstacle and completed her post-secondary schooling. Participant 9 stated, "I went on later to finish a bachelor's and then a master's degree, so I guess I got college down to some degree."

Acknowledging the need for self-motivation is also a testament to the individual's willingness to persevere and adapt to challenges to pursue higher education. Participant 10 observed the continuous journey of pursuing advanced education and the challenges that accompany it, including overcoming past family history. Participant 10 emphasized the significance of seeking support systems and resources to navigate the challenges of pursuing advanced education, particularly for individuals with a history in foster care. Participant 10 expressed a lack of substantial support during difficult circumstances and mentioned reaching out to individuals she anticipated would be unresponsive. Participant 10 explained:

I was able to get enrolled in college, which I found out later that there was financial assistance. And so, I went to college for three-and-a-half years, but I couldn't pass any of the remedial classes because I'd gotten so far behind in school with the divorce of my parents and moving around. I think I moved 19 times by the time I was 18 years old. So, I didn't have roots, you know, I had no roots in my family. All my family had, or was, either dead on my mom's side, and I have never met anybody on my dad's side of the

family. So, I was alone, very much alone. But I ended up going back to beauty school after those three-and-a-half years of college and opened up my own successful salon company.

The participants who sought higher education often encountered a range of obstacles that impacted their ability to succeed. However, these challenges can be overcome through perseverance and resilience, leading to a more secure and prosperous future.

**Theme 5 Summary.** The participants in this study who pursued higher education faced various obstacles that affected their ability to succeed. These obstacles included a lack of support and resources, past family history, and personal circumstances such as divorce and frequent moves. Despite these challenges, the participants strongly committed to pursuing higher education. They were resilient and determined in their pursuit, seeking support systems and resources to navigate their difficulties.

The participants highlighted the importance of support systems and resources in overcoming these obstacles. They expressed a need for support from educational institutions and the foster care system to successfully navigate the challenges of pursuing higher education. Furthermore, some participants mentioned the importance of having a sense of belonging and roots within the community, as their lack of family support and constant moving made it difficult for them to establish a stable foundation. The participants' family history, including divorce and a lack of familial connections, further exacerbated the feelings of isolation and instability. Ultimately, the participants in pursuing higher education aimed to build a better future for themselves and break the cycle of their past circumstances; they recognized the significance of education in creating opportunities for personal growth and achieving financial stability.

*Theme 6: Navigating the Dual Realities of Academics and Emotional Turmoil*

The narrative emphasizes the complex interplay between foster care status and the youths' social identity in school settings. This theme describes how self-inflicted and externally imposed perceptions can shape one's school experiences, from social interactions to emotional well-being, all shadowed by the foster care label.

**Stability.** Participant 4 expressed strong concern about the instability of her foster care placements and its detrimental effect on her educational attainment. She described frequently moving between different foster homes and schools, which disrupted her academic progress and made it difficult for her to develop meaningful relationships with teachers and peers. Participant 4 stated:

> I didn't get a real chance to graduate on time because I was bouncing from house to house. Put my freshman year to one school and obtained a certain number of credits, and then I went in the middle of my freshman year to another school and was only able to transfer so many of those credits. I didn't get an opportunity to get all the credits I needed for the year. That was the hardest part of all, not being able to stay in one school and not being stable enough to get the education that I needed to be able to move on in life.

Participants 7 and 10 highlighted the difficulties they faced in school, attributing their setbacks to the disruptions and challenges they encountered before and during their involvement in foster care. These disruptions affected their academic performance and emotional well-being, making it challenging to focus on schoolwork and navigate the demands of their education and their own personal struggles. Participant 7 stated:

I initially came into foster care because of what I believe I contributed to. I attempted to enroll myself in school because my mom did not enroll me for my freshman year. So, I started off behind.

Participant 10 stated:

High school was difficult for me. I moved around a lot from time to time, from second grade until I aged out of foster care. I was behind on schoolwork from the time I entered second grade.

Several participants linked their difficulty forming connections with school and relationships to maintaining a sense of constancy at one school location. Participant 6 stated, "I couldn't get to like a school because I knew if I was to leave that placement, I would have to go to a different school. And that was kind of hard on me." Participant 8 shared a similar sentiment; however, they placed it within the context of extracurricular activities, stating, "I couldn't seem to stay in one place long enough to even get to know how to become connected with the extracurriculars that I was interested in." Participant 10 emphasized the significance of establishing a solid base that provides stability and support. Participant 10 stated:

Yeah, I never did well in school, and I know that's because I never had roots in one place. We just continually moved, and so there was never a time to set up those routes and have that foundation for a good education.

Participant 9 highlighted the significance of maintaining a stable academic environment and a standardized educational program; this is particularly important for foster youth who often experience frequent school transfers and disruptions in their educational journey. Participant 9 stated:

Not only a different community but also the different curriculum and different

approaches to teaching that one teacher might take versus another is important. You

might be in school one day, working on one particular concept, and tomorrow, be moved

to a different school within the same grade, in the same calendar year, and are working on

a completely different set of concepts that you didn't have the foundation for.

**Concentration.** Concentration on education and school experiences emerged as a

significant theme in the findings of this study. The participants consistently expressed the

challenges they faced in maintaining academic focus and concentration due to the disruptions

caused by frequent moves and school transfers; this aligns with previous research that has shown

the negative impact of multiple placements and school transfers on the academic functioning of

foster care youth. Participant 4 stated:

I didn't get enough sleep, so I could never concentrate on school due to my not being able

to trust where I was. Honestly, I don't know how I've graduated. But it just put me in

survival mode to where it's hard for me to deal with people, hard for me to trust things,

hard for me to concentrate, hard for me to ask questions. It's been difficult, basically.

Participant 8 mentioned:

The constant changes and disruptions in my schooling made it difficult for me to

concentrate. Honestly, I got really mad in class because I couldn't focus. And so, I did not

like school and only finished freshman year with two or three credits. I was sent to an

alternative school after that, which triggered me, so I ran away and started flunking

school all over again.

Participant 10 expressed difficulty with maintaining focus due to spending time with peers who did not place importance on education and constantly adapting to new environments. Participant 10 stated:

> High school was really difficult for me. I ended up kind of hanging out with the wrong crowd and getting into a bit of trouble when I transitioned to my second foster home. I had a lot of difficulty concentrating, mostly because I was in a new environment.

Participant 3 expressed how transitioning affected her ability to concentrate, leading to a growing dislike for school and decreased confidence in her academic abilities. Participant 3 stated, "I've always been somebody who really likes school, and so having to move really messed with my self-esteem and concentration. It kind of messed up my confidence."

**Underprepared.** Participants 7 and 8 mentioned the lack of academic preparation they felt because of frequent school changes and disruptions. Participant 8 explained that their frequent transitions between schools created an inconsistent academic experience, making it difficult for them to participate in higher-level courses and impeding their progress. Participant 8 explained:

> In high school, I was going to my classes [and], for the most part, doing my homework; it was not as difficult prior to me attending university. I was not prepared for what college life would look like in the dorms. It was all downhill from there; I received too much freedom at once. I didn't know how to act, so I started partying and doing whatever I couldn't do while I was in the system.

Participant 7 also mentioned insufficient preparation for living independently, which led to early financial struggles as she was unaware of resources like FAFSA. Participant 7 stated:

I messed up before I had a chance to realize what I did. I didn't fill out my FASFA early

enough. I wasn't aware that I had to be done so early prior to attending the university, so I

will be spending this year paying out of pocket.

**School Environment.** Participant 7 placed a significant emphasis on the challenging

school environment that contributed to a lack of focus and concentration, making it difficult for

Participant 7 to succeed academically. Participant 7 mentioned:

I went to school on campus, and I tested out of everything pretty quickly. They realized

that their school was not equipped to handle teaching me because they didn't offer any

higher-level classes. From that point on, I really struggled to stay engaged.

**Outcasted.** Participants 6 and 8 expressed their alienation from adults and peers due to

their involvement in foster care and the frequent interruptions they experienced in their

education. They felt like outcasts in the school environment, contributing to their difficulties

concentrating and finding motivation for academic success. Participant 6 stated:

Being treated like an outsider at school. Basically, counselors felt like they needed to talk

to me more and stuff like that, which bothered me because I'm still normal. I just didn't

feel like a normal kid at school. They felt like they had to cater to me. And some schools

treated me like I was just a bad kid, and they just had to watch my every move.

Participant 8 further elaborated on her emotional response to the way she was treated at

school, expressing:

I always got into trouble, and they would make me do what they called think sheets. They

thought I was so stupid I refused to do them and got kicked out. They wanted me to

complete think sheets before I did any schoolwork. I was not a kindergartener, nor was I

in elementary school; completing one of those sheets made me feel really dumb. Because

I did not understand a lot of the reading and writing, my teacher would often become frustrated with me. This led to me skipping German class and meeting up with boys to do sexual things.

**Theme 6 Summary.** The experiences of Participant 7, Participant 6, and Participant 8 underscore the substantial influence of the school setting and interpersonal relationships on their scholastic achievements and psychological welfare. These participants faced various challenges, including a lack of academic opportunities, feelings of alienation and being treated as outsiders, and disciplinary measures that made them feel unworthy and unintelligent. These challenges affected their ability to focus and stay engaged in their studies and contributed to feelings of low self-esteem and a lack of motivation. Managing the parallel aspects of academic responsibilities and emotional distress can be a formidable task for students such as Participant 6 and Participant 8, who have encountered difficulties in foster care environments and witnessed traumatic events. All participant responses speak to the need for a supportive and understanding school environment that considers the unique challenges faced by students dealing with emotional turmoil. The experiences of these participants demonstrate the intricate balance between academic success and emotional well-being, highlighting the importance of a supportive and understanding school environment that addresses the specific needs of students facing emotional turmoil.

### Theme 7: Shaping Social Identity Amidst Foster Care Stigmas

This theme sheds light on foster youth's intertwined challenges in schools, balancing academic demands with personal struggles. While some difficulties may be common to many adolescents, the overlay of foster care experiences adds unique complexity, often requiring these individuals to juggle emotional turmoil with scholastic expectations.

**Impact of Foster Care on Social Identity and Perception in School.** Stigma and

negative stereotypes associated with foster care heavily influenced the perception of foster youth

in school settings. These stigmas may stem from misconceptions and generalizations about foster

youth being troubled, delinquent, or unable to succeed academically. As a result, foster youth

may experience difficulties in developing a positive social identity and actively engaging with

their peers. The compelling references to stigma made by our participants suggest the need for

additional research on strategies to help foster youth cope with the impact of stigma on

educational decisions, as well as methods to minimize stigma in school settings.

**Social Clubs and Social Butterflies.** Foster youth might struggle to find their place in

social clubs and navigate the dynamics of being a "social butterfly. The mentioned participants

(1, 3, 6, and 10) shared positive experiences within social clubs and peer groups about their

foster care status. Participant 1 highlighted the importance of finding a supportive peer group

that accepts and understands their experiences as foster youth. Participant stated:

I've always been that person. I love to socialize, you know, getting to know new people.

Remembering back on my experiences, I was definitely one of those kids. The one that

played along with others and had a fantastic day, despite what I knew was going on

behind all that.

Participant 6 also highlighted her ability to easily form friendships, mentioning that "I am

a social butterfly, so it's like I can make friends anywhere I go." Participants 3 and 10

highlighted the importance of club sports in fostering social connections and emphasized how

they can build and sustain relationships. Participant 3 stated, "I did gymnastics, softball, and

soccer, all to stay social. I stayed busy, and it was great for my social game. I did a lot of stuff

after school to keep me from being home." Participant 10 revealed that participating in club

sports helped them connect with peers who shared similar interests, providing a sense of belonging and normalcy despite their foster care status and the challenges they faced; they stated, "So, I did join the drama club and really enjoyed that. I made some friends in that club for sure, and having people around me that I could talk to and fit in with was nice."

**Mentality and Barriers.** Foster youth may face mental barriers and stigmas that hinder their ability to form trusting relationships with others. Participant 6 mentioned having a self-reliance and survival mentality due to their foster care experiences. Participant 6 stated:

Mentally, I've just always been strong headed. I really don't think negative. And situations, always look for positive outcomes. I also needed to stay strong physically so that I could stay motivated. Participant 9 expressed the importance of developing resilience in order to navigate the social difficulties commonly encountered during foster care placement; they stated:

I guess when you think about transitioning kiddos in ways they fit in at school. I usually think about kids who keep their heads down and just survive like I did sometimes. We are adaptable, and we can adjust to whatever the current environment is. I did that pretty well. I couldn't see myself being in a new place and not making connections. That would've been a thing that ended me.

Participant 3 acknowledged the significance of acquiring independent skills to avoid being perceived as a socially helpless foster youth. Participant 3 stated, "Needing help is not something that I would ever like to admit. So, I just worked really hard to get myself tough enough, and I made sure nobody saw me as less than anything other than what they were." Participant 7 emphasized the social challenge of attending school online to make up for academic setbacks. Participant 7 stated, "I did most of my learning online because I was so far behind. So that made it weird because I couldn't get to know those classmates or make friends."

**Unprocessed Emotions.** Unprocessed emotions can also pose a barrier to forming social connections for foster youth. Participant 5 spoke about their struggles with trust and building relationships due to unresolved emotions from their experiences in the foster care system. Participant 5 explained:

> I would say I was very socially awkward. I didn't want to engage in any type of conversation with different people. I was very isolated and kept to myself. Sometimes, I didn't want to make those social connections. I didn't want to try out for different sports because I didn't find it interesting then. In my mind, I was still in the process of being transitioned into foster care.

> Participants 8 and 9 expressed experiencing social isolation due to their challenges, which others often found difficult to relate to. Furthermore, those around them would sometimes pity them because of their circumstances. Participant 8 stated, "I guess I felt like an outsider because I had all these issues and stuff like that, and so I didn't feel normal."

Participant 9 provided an additional explanation:

> You know people feel sorry for you. You have to meet a new doctor, you have to meet a new counselor, you have to meet new school staff, and all those things lead to people feeling sorry for you. I became tired quickly, with people feeling sorry for me. I feel like sometimes foster kids are on display for everyone to see.

> Participant 3 remarked that schools often presented challenges in navigating the educational system due to foster youth's unique circumstances, and they attempted to lower expectations for them. Participant 3 stated:

> I think back to the time that I was in school; I remember teachers talking about lowering the credit limit needed for foster youth to graduate. I had the regular number of credits

that were needed for anybody to graduate because I didn't want anybody to think I needed additional help or handouts.

**Theme 7 Summary.** Foster youth face numerous challenges in forming social connections and shaping their social identity. These challenges include social awkwardness, isolation, and a reluctance to engage in activities or make connections due to unresolved emotions and past experiences in the foster care system. These challenges are influenced by stigmas and perceptions held by foster youth and those around them. The stigmas experienced by foster youth can contribute to feelings of being an outsider and pitied by others. Additionally, foster youth may encounter barriers in building positive relationships due to frequent placement disruptions, caregivers' stigmatized views of youth in their care, and their sense of self-reliance and autonomy as they age out of the foster care system. Furthermore, foster youth may face social stigma and discrimination from family, peers, and school staff, leading them to withdraw from social interactions and hide their foster care status. These challenges and stigmas surrounding foster youth can harm their social identity.

## Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 presents the research findings on the challenges foster youth face in navigating the foster care and schooling systems. Theme 1 featured content and analysis on the challenges foster youth encounter, including placement and school instability, early pregnancy and parenthood, mental health and substance use disorders, and homelessness and criminal justice system involvement. Theme 2 discussions focused on the inequities in connectedness and stability. The effects of numerous transitions and disruptions further burden older youth in foster care, including understanding what these transitions entailed. Moreover, the second theme addressed the absence of opportunities for self-expression before transitioning and the

inadequate support available after leaving foster care. In the theme of family connectedness, three participants acknowledged the significant impact that supportive figures such as foster parents have on the lives of youth in foster care. They also highlighted additional challenges in fostering family connections for these youth. Post-foster care focused on identifying trusted adults and family members who could provide long-term support and stability.

Theme 4 explored participants' experiences in maintaining family connections while in foster care and the importance of having supportive figures in their lives. Participants shared that barriers to meaningful connections between foster youth and foster parents were one of the key challenges in having a successful placement. Additionally, they discussed the stigma and discrimination that foster youth may face from their family, peers, and school staff, which can lead to social isolation. The fifth theme of the discussion emphasized the importance of self-determination and resilience in overcoming educational challenges caused by unstable foster care placements. The participants discussed the challenges and resilience needed to navigate the complexities of being an older youth in foster care. Theme 6 delved into the intricate process of navigating academic and emotional challenges. Various factors can influence the educational outcomes of foster youth, including stability, concentration, the school environment, level of preparation, and acceptance of individual differences. Lastly, Theme 7 explored how social identity shaped participant experiences, focusing on their mental obstacles, limited access to social opportunities, and insufficient time for emotional processing. This analysis considers the difficulties encountered when adjusting to unfamiliar settings, the need for stability during times of change, the significant role that supportive individuals play, managing connections with family members, appreciating personal motivation for achieving positive results, balancing academic pursuits alongside emotional distress, and recognizing how transitions can affect one's

sense of social identity. Organizations, schools, foster parents, and other entities involved in the

foster care process must prioritize cultivating authentic relationships with foster youth.

# Chapter 5- Summary, Discussions, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Discussion, Recommendations, and Conclusion

In this interpretive phenomenological analysis investigation, I aimed to examine the significant discussion among a group of 10 individuals who were previously in foster care and identify and understand the obstacles they encountered related to socialization, support, education, stigma, and healthcare based on their personal experiences. I employed a qualitative research approach to thoroughly examine former foster youth's experiences. Autoethnographic narratives and insights from Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory, Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory, and general strain theory provide an in-depth analysis. The results of this investigation demonstrate the difficulties and intricacies faced by former foster youth during their transition through the foster care system, as revealed by the participants' narratives. I prioritized using direct quotes from the participants to capture their voices authentically. However, I also identified recurring themes in the study, guided by the following research questions:

RQ1) How did former foster youth describe their experiences with foster home transitions?

RQ2) How did former foster youth describe the navigation of high school while transitioning to new homes?

The data analysis revealed seven key themes that pertain to the challenges former foster youth face during their transitions within the foster care system. The seven themes discussed in this document address various aspects of the experiences faced by foster care alumni as they transition into unfamiliar homes. The themes include the challenges encountered when adapting

to new environments, the search for stability amidst constant change, navigating family relationships and connections, the influence of supportive individuals on personal growth, self-driven academic pursuits despite uncertainties, navigating both academics and emotional turmoil simultaneously, and shaping social identity while overcoming stigmas associated with foster care. The findings align with social transition theory, social cognitive theory, social learning theory, and general strain theory. Chapter 5 offers a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the research findings presented in Chapter 4, addressing the main research questions by highlighting the key themes, connecting them to relevant theoretical frameworks, and providing practical implications and recommendations; by doing so, this study contributes valuable insights into existing literature on the topic.

<div align="center">**Discussion and Research Questions**</div>

This section emphasizes the relevance of the findings to the research questions. Each research question was separately analyzed to establish connections between each theme and question. All 10 participants demonstrated resilience by overcoming various challenges and identify the obstacles that former foster youth encountered while navigating their way through foster care and seeking social support during the transition period.

**Research Question 1**

*Based on the participant's personal experiences, how did former foster youth describe their experiences with foster home transitions?*

The participants' collective experiences and perspectives shed light on their transitions between various living environments during their foster care. These insights revealed four key themes that emerged in response to the initial research question. All participants experienced challenges when transitioning from one living environment to another, specifically in inadequate

preparation, uncertainty about what to expect, and difficulties transporting their personal belongings. All participants in this study shared their experiences of facing difficulties while navigating the foster care system and establishing meaningful relationships. Participants observed negative and positive interactions between adults, impacting their emotional well-being and academic focus, and highlighted the importance of maintaining self-determination throughout this process.

### *Theme 1: Challenges in Adapting to New Environments*

Transitioning foster youth face myriad challenges when adapting to new environments, a sentiment that resonated with the participants in this study. The literature review provided a comprehensive overview of these challenges, revealing the complex nature of participant experiences. A primary concern for foster youth was the profound instability and uncertainty that accompanied their transitions, especially when moving between different foster homes or aging out of the system. Decker et al. (2021) and Uffner et al. (2020) emphasized the discontinuity in their living situations, often leading to feelings of disconnection and a lack of continuity. The idea of discontinuity was further exacerbated by the loss of Medicaid coverage and other essential services upon aging out, leaving them vulnerable and unsupported (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). The participants' emphasis on the inadequate preparation they received before moving is a testament to the broader systemic issues within the foster care system. Researchers have highlighted the decline in mental health service use among these youth, attributed to various factors, including changes in insurance status, sociodemographic characteristics, and a lack of resources (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). A decline in service use and the challenges of managing personal belongings during transitions can intensify feelings of instability and distress.

The reluctance of participants to form new relationships and establish trust in unfamiliar settings mirrored the broader challenges they faced. Researchers have shown that transitioning foster youth often grapple with trauma, loss, instability, and a lack of supportive relationships (McMillen et al., 2015; Yildiz & Fidanci, 2019). Experiences of loss, coupled with the potential stigma associated with being in foster care, can understandably make them wary of forming connections that might be temporary. Researchers have also underscored the importance of social connections in easing the transitions for foster youth. Support networks, including foster parents, extended family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and social workers, can provide invaluable guidance, advice, and emotional support (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). However, the transient nature of their living situations often disrupts these networks, leaving them feeling isolated and unsupported. The challenges faced by transitioning foster youth when adapting to new environments are multilayered and deeply rooted in their experiences and systemic issues within the foster care system. Addressing challenges requires a comprehensive approach considering their unique needs and experiences. Theme 1 content, focused on adaptation, is related to Theme 2, the second most-cited theme, which features participant content connected to stability amidst changes.

### *Theme 2: Seeking Stability Amidst Change*

The participants' desire for stability amidst the frequent upheavals in foster care is a sentiment deeply rooted in the literature. Drawing on previous research, I further contextualize and expand upon this theme. The participants' emphasis on the need for consistent and reliable support systems finds resonance in previous researchers' results concerning the role of support networks in easing transitions for foster youth. Networks, crucial for emotional support, guidance, and resources, are vital for successful transitions into adulthood (Brown et al., 2019;

González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Additionally, as highlighted by Gale (2021) and Sofija et al. (2022), mentorship programs function as a valuable pillar of support, offering foster youth guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance. The challenges of establishing a consistent daily routine and the disruptions due to frequent placement changes appear in the literature's discussion on barriers to healthcare access. The discontinuity of insurance coverage, often resulting from aging out of the foster care system, exacerbates their difficulties accessing mental health care services (Uffner et al., 2020; Maria et al., 2020).

Academic setbacks foster youth faced are emphasized in the literature, which discusses the importance of comprehensive healthcare tailored to the unique needs of transitioning foster youth (Maria et al., 2020; Seker et al., 2022). Those findings align with participants' concerns about academic challenges and the effort required to keep pace with their peers. The participants' perception of lacking control over their placements and the challenges they faced upon exiting the foster care system appeared in the literature review discussion on the compounding challenges for expectant or parenting foster youth. Foster youth face even more significant challenges during their transition through foster and adulthood and seek stability to ease the transition (Maria et al., 2020; McMillen et al., 2015; Morton, 2013).

Lastly, the Theme 2 results underscore the importance of social connections and supportive relationships in the successful transition of foster youth into adulthood and find sufficient support in the literature (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). As discussed in the literature, the idea of social connections and supportive relationships aligned with participants' sentiments about the reluctance to form new relationships and the apprehension towards transient connections. The results offer a rich description of insights and research findings that provide a comprehensive backdrop against which the

participants' experiences become understandable. The many challenges participants faced and the critical role of support systems in aiding their transition are evident throughout the literature. Adequate support systems should ostensibly lead to the emergence of positive figures in a person's life, which is the topic of Theme 3.

### *Theme 3: The Influence of Supportive Figures on Positive Growth*

The participants' emphasis on the importance of foster parents as loving, caring, and consistent figures appears in the literature concerning the role of support networks in easing transitions for foster youth. Networks, which include foster parents, extended family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and social workers, offer guidance, advice, and emotional support (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Participants expressed concerns about the impact of the foster care system on their relationships with biological family members align with past research on the importance of maintaining social connections. Researchers have shown that foster youth with supportive relationships and regular positive contact with their birth families experience better physical and mental health outcomes (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020).

The significance of maintaining connections with biological families, even after the termination of parental rights, is further highlighted in the results concerning the power of social connections. Such connections provide a sense of belonging and social connectedness, which can mitigate the adverse effects of transitioning out of foster care (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Gale (2021) and Sofija et al. (2022) support the participants' emphasis on the power of connection with various supportive figures, such as siblings, teachers, or mentors, as having emerged as a valuable pillar of support, offering foster youth guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance. The literature reviewed in Chapter 2

aligns well with the participants' experiences, emphasizing the impact of supportive figures on the positive growth and well-being of foster youth, providing emotional support to guide foster youth through the challenges of transitioning to adulthood. Family members as positive role models are not atypical, leading to Theme 4, which elucidates the importance of and struggles in maintaining family connections in foster care.

*Theme 4: Navigating Family Ties and Connections*

Networks encompassing foster parents, extended family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and social workers are pivotal in offering guidance, advice, and emotional support (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). However, the quality and authenticity of these connections can vary significantly. As participants highlighted, while some foster parents and authority figures genuinely sought to uplift and guide them, others seemed more transactional, focusing on basic needs rather than emotional and developmental support. The literature underscores the role of mentorship as a pillar of support for foster youth (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022). When genuinely invested, mentors can be instrumental in guiding foster youth toward positive educational and career trajectories. However, as participants noted, relationships that lack authenticity can hinder growth and development. Lacking growth and development as a concept aligns with noted research emphasizing the power of social connections and the importance of maintaining positive relationships with caring non-parental adults (Roche et al., 2015; González-García et al., 2017).

Additionally, participants' discussions about the challenges of maintaining connections with biological families resonated with insights gained from the literature. Researchers have indicated that foster youth who maintained supportive relationships and regular positive contact with their birth families experienced better outcomes (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al.,

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2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). However, the complexities of the foster care system can sometimes strain these connections, leading to feelings of disconnection and loss. The results also touched upon the unique challenges parenting foster youth faces, which further complicated their relationships and connections. Researchers have noted that parenting foster youth often grapple with limited support systems, making it challenging to meet their and their children's needs (Morton, 2013; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021). The dual responsibility can strain their relationships with both biological and foster families, and the added pressure of caring for a child while navigating the intricacies of the foster care system can lead to feelings of isolation, further emphasizing the need for genuine connections and support (Brown et al., 2019; Gartenberg & Lang, 2016; González-García et al., 2017; Maria et al., 2020; Oluwamotemi et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Whether it is the guidance of a dedicated mentor, the emotional support of a foster parent, or the bond with biological family members, these connections play a crucial role in foster youth's well-being and positive growth.

**Research Question 2**

*Based on the participant's personal experiences, how did former foster youth describe the navigation of high school while transitioning to new homes?*

I examined participants' lived experiences and perspectives regarding how foster care affected their educational journey during the transition period, an exploration resulting in three key themes connected to research Question 2. The participants discussed the importance of determination and self-resilience in successfully navigating their educational journey.

*Theme 5: Self-Driven Within Academic Pursuits Amidst Uncertainty*

The results provide a comprehensive understanding of foster youth's challenges, especially in education. Participants wanted to achieve academic success despite their challenges

in the foster care system. The literature stresses the importance of providing educational opportunities and resources for foster youth to enhance their chances of successful adaptation after leaving care. The challenges foster youth face can significantly impact their long-term socioeconomic outcomes, including low educational attainment (Babbage et al., 2022; Folk et al., 2022). The participants' drive to succeed academically emerged from the results concerning foster youth's difficulties in maintaining relationships with birth families, adjusting to abrupt changes during the transition, and the potential adverse effects of social media use on mental health and well-being. Challenges can create additional barriers to academic success, making the participants' determination even more commendable (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019).

The results concerning the role of support networks in easing the transitions for foster youth, which includes their academic transitions, also find support in the literature (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Support networks, encompassing foster parents, extended family members, friends, teachers, mentors, and social workers, can offer practical assistance, such as help with education. Researchers have shown that foster youth who have supportive relationships and regular positive contact with their birth families experience better academic outcomes compared to those who lack such relationships (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Mentorship programs can be particularly beneficial for foster youth's academic pursuits, providing foster youth with guidance, encouragement, and practical assistance in navigating academic challenges. (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022). The presence of mentors can lead to positive academic outcomes, including improved social connectedness, which can be crucial for academic success (Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014).

Finally, transitioning foster youth often face barriers to accessing healthcare services, including mental health care, which can indirectly affect their academic performance (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020). Because of moving between foster homes, the discontinuity in their lives can disrupt their educational trajectories, leading to academic setbacks (Maria et al., 2020; Uffner et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, the resilience of these youth was evident in their determination to pursue education for a better future. While the participants faced numerous challenges in their academic pursuits due to the uncertainties of the foster care system, their determination, coupled with the support networks and resources highlighted in the results and supported in the academic literature, played a crucial role in their academic success. Theme 6 continues that narrative by examining how emotional issues may interfere with academics.

*Theme 6: Navigating the Dual Realities of Academics and Emotional Turmoil*

Participants conveyed the intricate balance of managing their academic aspirations while grappling with the emotional upheavals inherent to their foster care experiences. The results highlight the importance of support networks in aiding foster youth through these dual challenges (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Foster youth often face the dual challenge of managing their academic pursuits while grappling with emotional and psychological challenges stemming from their experiences in the foster care system. The role of support networks is pivotal in easing these transitions for foster youth (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). Support networks provide the emotional support, guidance, and resources needed for successful transitions into adulthood. Without these support networks, foster youth may struggle to manage the emotional turmoil that can arise from their experiences, further hindering their academic progress.

While participants discussed their determination to achieve academically, the frequent transitions between homes and schools often disrupted their educational trajectories. Disruptions erected barriers in maintaining consistent academic progress, leading to feelings of frustration and inadequacy. Unstable educational environments, compounded by the emotional and behavioural issues arising from participants' foster care experiences, often hindered their educational success (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019). Moreover, results emphasize the role of mentorship programs in supporting foster youth academically, which finds firm support in the literature (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022). Support programs provided emotional support and guidance in navigating academic challenges by matching foster youth with caring adults. The presence of such mentors was associated with improved academic outcomes and overall well-being (Maposa & Louw-Potgieter, 2014).

Participants also discussed the emotional toll of feeling isolated in their educational settings. Isolation, often stemming from the stigma associated with being in foster care, negatively impacted their mental well-being and, consequently, their academic achievements. However, the results suggest that establishing support groups tailored explicitly for foster youth provided them with a space to connect with others facing similar challenges, thereby aiding their emotional well-being and academic pursuits (Matos et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2018). The dual challenges of striving for academic success while navigating the emotional turmoil of their circumstances marked the participants' journey through the foster care system. The support structures and resources highlighted in the results and supported by the literature play a pivotal role in helping foster youth manage these dual realities. Finally, Theme 7 facilitates a discussion of how the participants forged and formed their social identities amidst the tumultuous world in which they often lived.

***Theme 7: Shaping Social Identity Amidst Foster Care Stigmas***

While providing relatively thin content (just 8.3% of the global coverage total), Theme 7 content stresses the importance of social identity formation and easing the transitions for foster youth (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017; Tschanz & Powell, 2020). The participants' narratives revealed a profound struggle in shaping their social identity amidst the prevailing stigmas associated with foster care. Participants often grappled with the dual realities of needing a support network while facing societal biases. The results revealed that maintaining social connections and reconnecting with people in their social network was critical to successful adaptation after transitioning out of foster care (Roche et al., 2015). However, the stigma of foster care often overshadowed those connections, making it challenging for participants to fully integrate into their social circles.

The societal bias surrounding foster care often brought participants feelings of isolation and misjudgement. Participants frequently encountered situations where their foster care status became the defining aspect of their identity, overshadowing their personalities, achievements, and aspirations. Stigmatization often resulted in feelings of isolation and a lack of belonging, further complicating their efforts to forge a positive social identity. However, participants also found solace in mentorship programs and support groups, as mentioned in the results, and supported in the literature (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022; Terrile, 2022). Support platforms allowed participants to connect with individuals understanding of their unique challenges, enabling the foster child to reshape their social identities away from the stigmas of foster care. Participants reported shaping of social identity as a complex process, influenced by both the supportive figures in their lives and the societal stigmas associated with foster care. The

literature provides insights into the various support structures that can aid foster youth in navigating these challenges and forging a positive social identity.

**Theme Discussion Summary**

I examined the lived experiences of former foster youth, exploring their challenges and coping mechanisms during transitions between foster homes and their navigation through high school amidst these changes. Seven primary themes emerged, creating a comprehensive narrative of their experiences. Transitioning foster youth grapple with instability and uncertainty, often exacerbated by inadequate preparation and the loss of essential services like Medicaid upon aging out. The literature underscores these sentiments, pointing to systemic issues within the foster care system that intensify feelings of instability and distress. The reluctance to form new relationships, stemming from past traumas and potential stigmas, further complicates their adaptation process. The desire for stability is a recurring theme among participants, which is mirrored in the literature, emphasizing the role of support networks in facilitating smoother transitions. However, frequent placement changes disrupt routines, leading to academic setbacks and emotional challenges. The literature also highlights foster youth's barriers, from discontinuity in insurance coverage to limited access to mental health services.

Supportive figures play a pivotal role in the positive growth of foster youth. The literature corroborates the participants' experiences, emphasizing the importance of maintaining connections with birth families and the potential benefits of mentorship programs. The quality of connections foster youth form varies significantly, but genuine relationships can guide them toward positive outcomes, while inauthentic ones can hinder growth. The literature emphasizes the importance of these connections, especially with birth families, in ensuring better outcomes for foster youth. Despite the foster care system's challenges, participants showed a commendable

determination to succeed academically. The results highlight the barriers they face, from

disruptions in their educational trajectories to limited access to resources. However, their

resilience, coupled with the support networks highlighted in the literature, is crucial to their

academic success.

Balancing academic aspirations with emotional challenges is a delicate act for foster

youth. The results showed the importance of support networks in aiding them through these dual

challenges. Mentorship programs emerge as a beacon of support, guiding them through academic

challenges while providing emotional support. The stigma associated with foster care profoundly

impacts the social identity of participants. Participants often grappled with feelings of isolation

and misunderstanding, with their foster care status overshadowing their identities. However,

mentorship programs and support groups offer a reprieve, providing platforms for them to

connect with others and reshape their identities. The results offer rich data on the experiences of

former foster youth, shedding light on their challenges, aspirations, and coping mechanisms, and

the literature provides a robust backdrop, emphasizing the systemic issues they faced and the

potential solutions that aided their transition into adulthood.

## Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

### Overview of the Theoretical Connections

Chapter 2 provided comprehensive information on the theoretical frameworks that guided

this study: Nancy Schlossberg's transition theory, Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory (SCT)

and social learning theory (SLT), and general strain theory (GST). Integrating the theoretical lens

of Nancy Schlossberg's Transition Theory exposed barriers and challenges foster youth face

during their transition through and out of the foster care system. These barriers included the

stigma surrounding foster care, the lack of support from peers and educators, and the impact of

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unprocessed trauma on their well-being. SCT and SLT provided insight into the role of social

interactions and modelling in shaping foster youth's social and emotional development. These

theoretical frameworks helped contextualize and understand foster youth alumni's experiences

and challenges when transitioning to unfamiliar homes. GST highlighted the potential strain and

stressors foster youth face, such as the loss of stability and support systems, which can contribute

to adverse outcomes if not effectively addressed.

I explored the experiences of the 10 participants to understand how these theoretical

frameworks manifested in their lives and influenced their adaptive processes during the

transition. Consistent with the frameworks mentioned above, the findings revealed a lack of

support in preventing or addressing youth's difficulties as they transition from foster care to

adulthood. The study's findings indicated that genuine relationships between foster caregivers

and youth are a critical factor in the overall well-being of foster youth during their transition into

unfamiliar homes. These relationships serve as a protective factor, helping foster youth avoid

high-risk behaviours, develop future goals, and move beyond *survival mode*. Moreover, the study

highlighted the importance of examining the nuanced contexts that influence youth's transitions

to adulthood. These nuanced contexts include the quality and substance of foster youth's

relationships with their caregivers and the available resources and support.

I identified negative patterns within foster homes, including insufficient support,

inconsistent parenting approaches, and inadequate preparation for adulthood. I obtained the

findings through a thorough analysis of existing literature and interviews with individuals who

have experienced the transition process while in foster care. The study emphasized the

intersection of social constructs of identity and their impact on foster youth in care. Comparable

to how SCT and SLT emphasize the importance of social relationships and the influence of

others on individual development, this study highlighted how foster caregivers can serve as critical figures in shaping the trajectories of foster youth's transitions to adulthood.

This study adds to the literature on the experiences of foster youth during the transition to adulthood and the role of foster caregivers in supporting their well-being. The literature review showed that this theoretical lens remains relatively unexplored concerning the experiences of foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Havlicek (2013) completed the most relatable study to this research, emphasizing the importance of examining the contextual factors that influence youth's transitions to adulthood, particularly their frequent placement disruptions. Havlicek further asserted the importance of considering the length of stay in a foster home as it appears to correlate positively with closer relationships between foster youth and their caregivers. Havlicek's findings support participant comments in my study, as they found that longer stays in foster homes allowed for more robust and more meaningful connections with their caregivers.

Research suggests that some form of injustice is bound to occur within the foster care system (Katz et al., 2016; Moussavi et al., 2021), as evidenced by the negative patterns and inadequate support identified in this study. These injustices may include disparities in resources and services provided to foster youth, inconsistencies in parenting approaches, and insufficient preparation for adulthood. The prevalence of the foster care system during the transitional phase for young individuals in care acknowledges that some foster youth may need more assistance and provisions to navigate their journey into adulthood effectively. I intended to address the gap in accountability for state organizations and educators in providing support and resources to foster youth during their transition to adulthood. Using social cognitive theory, social learning theory, self-efficacy theory as a conceptual framework, I did not intend to investigate the factors

contributing to the challenges older youth face in foster care when navigating transitions within the foster care system. Instead, I aimed to explore the reasons behind and mechanisms through which the foster care system falls short in adequately supporting older foster youth during their journey into adulthood.

**Theoretical Framework Elements Connected to the Themes**

Understanding the experiences of foster youth as they navigate complex and often challenging educational journeys necessitates a deep exploration of the theoretical underpinnings that illuminate their paths. The themes revealed in this study shed light on the dimensions of foster youth's academic pursuits, from the resolve they exhibited in the face of adversity to the obstacles they encounter and the importance of support systems. In this section, I explore the theoretical frameworks that underpin the comprehension of the experiences of foster youth in education to provide a comprehensive understanding of these themes (Table 3). The theoretical framework elements offer valuable insights into the psychological, emotional, and social aspects of foster youth's educational journeys. Through connecting the narratives of foster youth to these theoretical foundations, I provide additional insight into the driving forces, challenges, and the dynamic interplay of factors that shape their pursuit of education.

**Table 3**

*Theoretical Framework and Thematic Alignment*

| Theoretical framework element | Thematic alignment |
| --- | --- |
| Transition theory | Theme 1: Challenges in adapting to new environments |
| | Theme 2: Seeking stability amidst change |
| | Theme 4: Navigating family ties and connections |
| Social cognitive theory | Theme 3: The influence of supportive figures on positive growth |
| | Theme 7: Shaping social identity amidst foster care stigmas |
| Social learning theory | Theme 6: Navigating the dual realities of academics and emotional turmoil |
| General strain theory | Theme 5: Self-driven within academic pursuits amidst uncertainty |

*Transition Theory*

Transition theory focuses on how individuals cope with life transitions and the role of support systems during these changes.

**Theme 1: Challenges in Adapting to New Environments.** The core of transition theory is understanding the individual's experience during change. Foster youth transitioning between homes and environments epitomizes the life transition Schlossberg's theory addresses. The feelings of instability, uncertainty, and the profound challenges of adapting to new environments directly relate to the barriers and challenges foster youth face during their transition (Decker et al., 2021; Uffner et al., 2020).

**Theme 2: Seeking Stability Amidst Change.** The desire for stability amidst the frequent upheavals in foster care is deeply rooted in the essence of transition theory. The theory emphasizes the importance of support during transitions, echoed in the participants' experiences and the role of support networks (Brown et al., 2019; González-García et al., 2017).

**Theme 4: Navigating Family Ties and Connections.** Transition theory also touches upon the complexities of maintaining connections during life transitions. The participants' experiences of maintaining or losing connections with biological families and the feelings of disconnection and loss are part of the transition process that Schlossberg's theory seeks to understand (Tschanz & Powell, 2020).

*Social Cognitive Theory*

SCT emphasizes the role of observational learning, social experience, and the influence of models on behavior.

**Theme 3: The Influence of Supportive Figures on Positive Growth.** SCT underscores the importance of models in shaping behavior and beliefs. The participants' emphasis on supportive figures, such as foster parents, mentors, and teachers, aligns with SCT's focus. These figures act as models, influencing the foster youths' behavior, beliefs, and overall growth (Gale, 2021; Sofija et al., 2022).

**Theme 7: Shaping Social Identity Amidst Foster Care Stigmas.** SCT also touches upon the influence of societal views and biases on self-efficacy and self-concept. The participants' struggle in shaping their social identity amidst the prevailing stigmas associated with foster care materializes through the lens of SCT, where societal biases can influence an individual's self-belief and actions (Roche et al., 2015).

*Social Learning Theory*

SLT posits that people learn from observing others, with the environment, cognition, and behavior all playing a role.

**Theme 6: Navigating the Dual Realities of Academics and Emotional Turmoil.** SLT's core is understanding how individuals learn from their environment. The participants' experiences managing academic aspirations while grappling with emotional upheavals inherent to their foster care experiences can be understood through SLT. Their reluctance to form new relationships and the challenges they face in their academic pursuits due to the uncertainties of the foster care system arise as outcomes of their learned experiences from their environment (Capous-Desyllas et al., 2019).

*General Strain Theory*

GST posits that strain or stressors can lead to negative emotions, which, if not addressed, can result in adverse outcomes.

**Theme 5: Self-Driven Within Academic Pursuits Amidst Uncertainty.** GST focuses on the adverse outcomes of unaddressed strains or stressors. Despite their challenges within the foster care system, the participants' drive to succeed academically was a response to the strains they experienced. The lack of support in preventing or addressing the difficulties youth encounter as they transition from foster care to adulthood, as described in the theoretical frameworks section, aligns with the GST's focus on the potential adverse outcomes of unaddressed strain (Moussavi et al., 2021; Katz et al., 2016).

**Strengths and Weaknesses of Foster Care in America**

*Strengths*

One of the strengths of the foster care system is its potential to provide a safe and stable environment for children who cannot live with their biological families. The system aims to protect children from abuse and neglect while providing the necessary support and resources for their well-being. Another strength of the foster care system is its ability to offer temporary care and placement for children until they can be reunified with their biological families or find a permanent adoptive family.

*Weaknesses*

However, despite these strengths, the foster care system has several weaknesses. One significant weakness is the lack of sufficient support and preparation for older foster youth transitioning into adulthood; this is particularly evident in the challenges faced by foster youth when finding stable housing, obtaining education and employment opportunities, and avoiding adverse outcomes such as homelessness. The lack of positive family support and multiple foster care placements contribute to the difficulties foster youth face in building lasting relationships and establishing commitments to institutions of adulthood.

## Limitations

The research findings cannot apply broadly to other contexts (i.e., all older youth in foster care). Alternatively, this study sought to investigate the first-hand experiences of 10 former foster youth, offering valuable perspectives and a foundation for future exploration in this area that has yet to receive much attention. Certainly, it is essential to acknowledge that the findings do not apply to all older youth in foster care across the United States. Additionally, I served as the researcher and data collector for this study, which may have introduced some limitations

regarding diverse perspectives. While I attempted to minimize bias through memo checking and rigorous analysis, my personal experiences and connections with the participants may have influenced the interpretation of their stories. Additionally, poor WIFI access impacted the fluidity of the conversations at times throughout the study.

## Recommendations for Practice and Research

### Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings presented in this study, I offer several recommendations for practical application. The youth emphasized the importance of making systemic changes that align with the principles outlined in trauma-informed systems of care. The recommendations revolve around six key areas:

- early intervention for struggling families

- improved placement options within foster homes

- access to supportive adults

- trained foster parents equipped to handle emotionally and behaviourally challenged youth.

- consistent relationships

- meaningful involvement of youth in leadership roles.

### *Recommendation 1*

Based on the data presented, it is crucial to intervene earlier with struggling families. By identifying and addressing issues early, it is possible to prevent them from escalating and having a detrimental impact on the youth. Providing support and resources to needy families can promote healthier family dynamics and reduce the likelihood of children entering the foster care system.

*Recommendation 2*

Another important recommendation is to improve foster home placements. It is essential to ensure foster parents have the necessary skills to handle emotionally and behaviourally challenged youth; this is achievable through comprehensive training programs and ongoing support for foster parents.

*Recommendation 3*

Access to supportive adults is crucial for foster care youth's well-being. Research has shown that having caring adults in their lives can significantly enhance foster youth's social and emotional well-being; this is achievable by fostering relationships with mentors, therapists, or other supportive figures who can guide and emotionally support the youth.

*Recommendation 4*

Continuity of relationships is paramount for foster youth. Studies have demonstrated the positive impact of consistent relationships on foster youth's social and emotional well-being. I recommended prioritizing establishing and maintaining stable relationships for foster youth in foster care.

*Recommendation 5*

Involving youth in leadership roles is a crucial recommendation highlighted by the literature. Research suggests that involving youth in decision-making and empowering them to take on leadership roles can have numerous benefits. Decision-making can enhance their self-esteem, sense of belonging, and overall well-being. By involving foster youth in leadership roles, we can give them a sense of agency and ownership over their lives, increasing their motivation to succeed and promoting positive development.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While the literature provides valuable insights into system changes that can improve outcomes for youth in foster care, some limitations and areas for further research must receive attention. I report these recommendations in two sections, one covering qualitative and one addressing quantitative recommendations.

*Qualitative Recommendations*

Within the complex framework of child welfare, using early intervention measures plays a crucial role in shaping a child's developmental trajectory. In this potential study the researchers explore the lived experiences of families, synthesizing their narratives to shed light on the effectiveness of early intervention programs in mitigating the need for foster care placements. The primary aim of this research is to examine the efficacy of early intervention tactics in preserving familial cohesion, promoting the welfare of children, and preventing the necessity of placing them in alternative care settings. Using a narrative inquiry methodology, a qualitative research approach aimed at comprehending and interpreting individuals' life narratives, this study could offer a comprehensive comprehension of the experiences, difficulties, and significance of early interventions in the trajectory of families.

This inquiry centers around two separate groups: families receiving early intervention services and families not. The process of data collection would likely heavily rely on qualitative interviews. Conducting in-depth, semi-structured interviews with families allows them to express their narratives openly, centering on their encounters during crises, the resources and strategies they used or offered, and the perceived consequences of these strategies on their family's stability and the child's well-being. The researchers should conduct interviews with service providers as well to have a thorough picture. These discussions could provide valuable perspectives on the

conceptualization and execution of early intervention techniques, the obstacles encountered in providing these services, and the aspects that necessitate improvement. After the process of transcribing, the narratives undergo thematic analysis, which encompasses coding, the identification of patterns, and the extraction of significant themes. The approach hinges on the crucial comparisons between the experiences of families subjected to interventions and those who were not.

The expected results of this study involve gaining a thorough comprehension of the role and effects of early intervention strategies in mitigating the need for foster care placements. Moreover, the primary objective is to ascertain the resources and tactics that have demonstrated the highest efficacy in assisting families experiencing crises. The study results may subsequently provide valuable insights for policymakers and practitioners, focusing on improving the design and implementation of early intervention services. This research could elucidate the intricacies of early intervention programs by prioritizing the perspectives of families. The narratives presented by individuals outline a trajectory that may emphasize the preservation of familial unity, the promotion of children's welfare, and the proactive avoidance of foster care arrangements.

For a potential study, the researchers could conduct an in-depth analysis of a particular occurrence, offering a case study that encompasses the real-life encounters of a family, thereby emphasizing the concrete effects of early intervention methods in preventing the need for foster care arrangements. The main objective of this study is to thoroughly examine the impact of early intervention options on maintaining family cohesion, enhancing child well-being, and reducing the need for out-of-home placements. This study used a case study methodology to conduct a comprehensive investigation into the experiences of a particular family, elucidating the complex

obstacles they experienced, the interventions they encountered, and the resulting results of these interventions.

The subject under examination involves two crucial stages: the duration the family received early intervention services and the duration in which they were not. Data is collected with great care and precision using rigorous interview processes. The interviews, which are notable for their comprehensive nature and organized format, allow the family to express their experiences in a detailed manner. Participants could discuss their challenges, the various resources used, and their perspectives on how these approaches influenced their family's stability and their child's overall well-being. Interviews could occur with the service providers who had interacted with the family to achieve comprehensive comprehension. These encounters provide valuable insights into the intricacies of implementing early intervention strategies, the challenges faced in delivering services, and possible areas for improvement. After transcription, the case study undergoes analysis, wherein the careful examination of the narrative helps the researchers discern recurring patterns, thematic elements, and significant insights. The central focus of this research lies in comparing the family's experiences during the periods in which they received treatments and those in which they did not.

The intended outcomes of this research may offer a detailed comprehension of the concrete effects of early intervention tactics, as demonstrated by the case study. Additionally, the study aims to identify particular resources and tactics that had a crucial role in supporting the family amidst their crises. As mentioned above, the findings may help generate practical suggestions for policymakers and practitioners, emphasizing the importance of improving and streamlining the implementation of early intervention services. This case study aims to elucidate the complex dynamics of early intervention efforts by grounding the research in the lived

experiences of a specific family. This study examines the experiences of a particular family, shedding light on the importance of family cohesion, child well-being, and proactive measures to prevent foster care placements.

**Interagency Collaboration and Intervention in Foster Care: An Exploratory Qualitative Study.** Given the complex and diverse nature of the obstacles experienced by these children, it is not feasible for any agency to comprehensively meet all their requirements. Therefore, collaboration between agencies becomes of utmost importance. The present study explores the intricate dynamics of interagency collaboration and intervention models within the foster care system to develop a grounded theory that comprehensively captures the fundamental nature of these joint endeavors. The objective of this potential study is to construct a theoretical framework based on empirical evidence gathered from the field. The researchers could examine explicitly interagency collaboration and its potential impact on intervention strategies within the foster care setting. The researchers would use a grounded theory methodology to investigate the fundamental processes, obstacles, and achievements associated with joint endeavors.

Data collection is based on qualitative methodologies, wherein interviews are the fundamental approach. Interviews encompass both organized and open-ended formats, intending to engage stakeholders from diverse agencies that play a role in the foster care system. Study objectives could include uncovering valuable understandings regarding the collaborative efforts of these organizations, the strategies they use to coordinate services, and the treatments they collectively implement to improve outcomes for youth in foster care. In addition to conducting interviews, examining interagency agreements, protocols, and intervention models through document analysis yields a diverse range of data, collectively presenting a comprehensive perspective of the collaborative landscape.

Following data collection, the grounded theory technique encompasses repeated coding processes, continual comparison, and theoretical sampling. The researchers could employ a rigorous analytical approach to discern emergent themes, patterns, and linkages inherent in the collected data. As the research advances, the developing theory would undergo further refinement, culminating in a comprehensive, grounded theory encompassing the fundamental aspects of interagency collaboration and intervention within the foster care system. The expected outcomes of this research aim to offer a comprehensive comprehension of the procedures, obstacles, and achievements associated with interagency collaboration. Furthermore, the objective of this study is to emphasize effective collaborative strategies and identify specific areas needing improvement within the interagency framework for promoting foster care. In this grounded theory, the researchers could seek to establish a theoretical framework by drawing on agencies' real-life experiences and documented practices. The objective may be to understand the intricacies of interagency collaboration and provide a comprehensive guide for enhancing collaborative efforts to promote the welfare of youth in foster care.

*Quantitative Recommendations*

**Project 1, Difference of Means Testing: Assessing the Impact of Trauma-Informed Training on Foster Parenting.** In foster care, equipping foster parents with the necessary skills to support emotionally and behaviourally challenged youth is paramount. The objective of this possible study is to evaluate the effectiveness of trauma-informed training on foster parents' ability to support emotionally and behaviourally challenged youth through quantitative means. The researchers could involve a comparative study design, employing a difference of means testing approach. Two groups are possible: one comprising foster parents who have undergone trauma-informed training and another group who have not received such training. Standardized

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surveys or assessments could be administered to both groups to measure their skills, knowledge, and confidence in handling challenging behaviours within the foster care context. The heart of the study lies in the analysis of mean scores between the two groups, for which difference of means testing (e.g., t-test, ANOVA, Wilcoxon rank sum, Kruskal-Wallis) is suitable. Difference of means testing can elucidate whether there exists a statistically significant difference in outcomes between trained and untrained foster parents. Potential confounding variables, such as prior experience in foster care, will be controlled in the analysis as covariates. The researchers may provide quantitative evidence that can ascertain whether trauma-informed training significantly enhances foster parents' abilities to support youth grappling with trauma-related challenges.

**Project 2, Correlation: Exploring the Relationship Between Foster Care Placement Stability and Educational Attainment.** The central objective of this potential research project is to quantitatively examine the potential correlation between the stability of foster care placements and the educational attainment of youth within the foster care system. The researchers could adopt a correlation-based research design, with data collection concerning the number of placement changes experienced by foster youth over a specific period will initiate the research. Additionally, comprehensive educational attainment data could be collected, encompassing high school graduation rates and post-secondary enrolment rates for the same foster youth cohort. Correlation (e.g., Pearson's *r*, Spearman's *rho*, Kendall's rank correlation) may elucidate the relationship's nuances. These approaches will not only measure the strength of the relationship but also ascertain its direction (positive or negative correlation). Throughout the analysis, potential covariates, including age, gender, and placement quality, will be controlled for robust and reliable results. This research undertaking may help quantifying the degree of

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correlation between placement stability and educational attainment among youth in foster care. The findings could reveal this demographic's role of stable placements in nurturing academic success.

**Project 3, Regression: Predicting the Long-Term Academic Success of Former Foster Youth.** Navigating the transition from foster care to adulthood is replete with challenges, particularly concerning long-term academic success. The primary aim of this possible research project is to construct a quantitative predictive model that anticipates the long-term academic success of former foster youth based on a comprehensive array of predictors. The researchers could use a regression-based investigative journey. The researcher should build a comprehensive dataset featuring former foster youth. The dataset could encompass demographic information, foster care experiences, educational history, and post-foster support data. Researchers could identify and discern significant predictors of long-term academic success using multiple regression analysis (alternatively, bi-variate, ordinal, or logistic model selection would depend on many factors not covered here). These predictors could include completing higher education, stable employment, and income levels. A predictive model may emerge through systematic analysis encompassing various factors and their respective weights in determining academic outcomes for this unique demographic. Furthermore, the model validity could be assessed with a separate dataset, cross-validation techniques, or Cronbach's alpha analysis. The envisioned outcome of this research initiative could provide a sophisticated predictive model that quantitatively estimates the likelihood of long-term academic success for former foster youth. This tool may empower policymakers and support agencies to design and tailor interventions inherently more effective and informed.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed areas for improvement to enhance the outcomes of youth in foster care. Both academically and socially, the voices of former foster youth highlighted the limitations to be addressed; this calls for further research to better understand and address these issues. The participants face social stigma, limited resources, and a lack of support networks. They may also encounter barriers to accessing and actively engaging in activities that could increase their social support during and after transitioning out of foster care. Interventions must be evidence-based and culturally responsive to effectively address these challenges and ensure that youth connect to peer, social, and community networks throughout their experience in foster care. More research is needed on this population to understand better how best to provide professional assistance as they prepare for adulthood outside the foster care system, where such support may not be readily available.

This interpretative phenomenological investigation aimed to gain insight into the personal experiences of individuals who have aged out of foster care and transitioned into adulthood. This study aimed to engage in meaningful conversations with former foster youth to understand their journey. Through first-hand accounts from 10 former foster youth who have aged out of the system, this study sheds light on the multifaceted challenges they face as they transition into adulthood. By documenting their perspectives and experiences, we contribute to a deeper understanding of the lived realities for ethnic minority youth navigating through foster care. This qualitative exploration fills an essential gap in the existing literature and offers valuable insights into how these experiences shape their perceptions of successful adult transitions. Chapter 5 identified several limitations in the current understanding of foster care and provided recommendations for further research. These recommendations include exploring the

effectiveness of early intervention with struggling families, evaluating trauma-informed training programs for foster parents, investigating the long-term effects of foster care placements on academic success, and promoting interagency collaboration and intervention. Addressing these research areas can improve the outcomes and well-being of children and youth in foster care.

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# Appendix A - Interview Guide for Former Foster Youth Interviews

**Appendix A**
**Interview Guide for Former Foster Youth Interviews**

Name: _____

Location: _____

Time/Date:

**Note:** Below are the interview processes and questions intended for three rounds of interviews with participants throughout this study. Also listed are the anticipated interview questions for rounds 2 and 3 of the interview process. Due to the nature of qualitative research, interviews in rounds 2 and 3 will be adapted based on responses offered in the first round of interviews allowing new and unforeseen topics to be explored in the research process. What is listed below, are the anticipated questions and intended lines of inquiry established at the beginning of the research process.

**Questions and Interview Process:**

### Round 1

**Part 1: Introductions**
1. Confirmation of Informed Consent signature, and receipt of the project summary handout allowing for questions and clarifications.
2. Ask participant to identify a pseudonym
3. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Part 2: Questions**
1. Tell me about you experience/experiences with foster placement transitioning.
2. Walk me through the transitioning process.
3. Please describe and average day post transitioning to your new placement.
4. Tell me more about the feelings/emotions felt during the transition.
5. Tell me about what you would want to be different with this process.
6. Describe your overall feelings about foster care in general.
7. Does it impact your emotional or educational growth?

### Round 2

**Part 1: Introductions**
1. Remind of informed consent signed in first interview.
2. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Part 2: Questions**

1. Tell me about your experiences in education while in high school.
2. Walk me through a normal school day for you.
3. Describe any hardships that foster care creates in your education.
4. Tell me what you considered to be your school strengths when you were in high school.
5. Describe what your post high school plan looked like…
6. In your last interview you said XXXX, could you tell me more about.
7. Here are some of the primary things I'm hearing from you…..XXXXXX…..is this accurate?
8. Advice to another foster youth.

### Round 3

**Part 1: Introductions**
1. Reminder of informed consent signed in first interview.
2. Remind participants steps taken to ensure confidentiality, and their participation is voluntary, allowing them to withdraw at any time without penalty.

**Part 2: Questions**
1. In your last interview you said XXXX, Could you tell me more about…

## Appendix B - Recruitment Flyer

# Theory Study

Hi, my name is Marcellis Washington. I am a counselor education and supervision doctoral student at K-State as well as a licensed professional counselor.

In my theory study, I focus on how teachers and educators need a deep understanding of the foster youth transition process to promote student success.

I am looking for adults between the age of 18-45 who were in foster care as children.

For this study you will be asked to participate in at least two virtual individual interviews and one virtual focus group interview. Participants will receive $25 dollars upon completion.

If you are interested and would like to participate, please contact me at: **mdwashin@ksu.edu**

# Appendix C - Informed Consent

### Institutional Review Board (IRB)
### APPENDIX B
### **Informed Consent Form**
comply@k-state.edu | 785-532-3224

**PROJECT TITLE:**

| |
|---|
| UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMER |
| FOSTER YOUTH DURING THE AGE-OUT PROCESS: |
| AN INTERPRETIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS |

| **PROJECT APPROVAL DATE:** | 06/1/2022 | **PROJECT EXPIRATION DATE:** | 12/15/2024 | **LENGTH OF STUDY:** | 2 years |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

| **PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** | Dr. Doris Carroll |
|---|---|

| **CO-INVESTIGATOR(S):** | Marcellis Washington MSEd, PLPC, Ph.D. student Kansas State University |
|---|---|

| **CONTACT DETAILS FOR PROBLEMS/QUESTIONS:** | PI: Doris Carroll: dcarroll@ksu.edu, Phone: 785-587-7423 Co-PI email: mdwashin@ksu.edu Phone: 785-220-1444 |
|---|---|

| **IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** | **IRB CHAIR CONTACT INFORMATION:** *For the subject should he/she have questions or wish to discuss on any aspect of the research with an official of the university or the IRB. These are:* Dr. Lisa Rubin , Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224i./ Brad Woods , Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hleditreall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224. |
|---|---|

| **PROJECT SPONSOR:** | N/A |
|---|---|

**PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH:**

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is to understand the lived experiences of former older youth in foster care (FFY) during periods of transitions. A deeper understanding of the foster care transitioning processes and its impact on older youth's (high school aged students in state custody) school engagement is sorely needed. Administrators and educators also benefit from increasing their education and awareness on foster youth transition processes impact promoting student success, and offering insights into practices and resources to better support high school age youth in foster care

**PROCEDURES OR METHODS TO BE USED:**

Former foster youth: I will post a recruiting invitation to participate messaging through social media platforms (i.e facebook).

Recruiting message: My name Marcellis Washington and I am a counselor education and supervision doctoral student at Kansas State University and a licensed professional counselor. Teachers and educators need a deep understanding of the foster youth transition process to promote student success. I am recruiting adults to participate in at least one virtual interview. I am looking for 10 adults between the age of 18-45 who were in foster care as children. Participants are being asked to participate in at least two individual interviews and one focus group interview. These interviews will be virtual interviews.