

FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO INDEPENDENT LIVING AND HIGHER  
EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Janet Pearman Harrison

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of foster youth who aged out of foster care and enrolled in higher educational programs in rural areas of southern Virginia. The theory that guided this study was Maslow's hierarchy of needs as it applied to higher educational pursuits of foster youth who had, or were about to, age out of foster care. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory also guided this study to identify additional barriers to higher education for foster youth. This phenomenological study used a transcendental research method. Data collection methods included face-to-face and phone interviews, focus groups, participant captions for picture cards, and data from intake documents and school records that provided accurate demographic information. Interviews and focus groups were conducted primarily by phone while captions, demographics, and consent were compiled through email, postal service, and participating school records. Moustakas' modified method was used to analyze data for this study. The central research question for consideration was as follows: What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college? The 12 participants for this study shared their unique life experiences as they aged out of foster care and enrolled in higher education programs. While the participants' educational barriers differed to some degree, one commonality each faced was the lack of a dependable adult role model for encouragement and support. The impact of this missing element was evident in the life-choices of participants.

*Keywords:* foster youth, aging out of foster care, emancipation from foster care, independent living, higher education

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## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate my work to the loving support of my dear family, my church family, and very dear friends. My husband Roger said, “You might as well keep going while you’re on a roll.” While I do feel like I have been a career student for the better part of a decade, I believe this educational journey to have been at least one major path that God set before me. Philippians 1:6 says, “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (New King James Version).

My mother, “Nanna Anna,” has taken care of my two sons when my husband and I could not, and she has supported me throughout all my higher education pursuits. My sons, Caleb and Kyle, have grown into fine, self-sufficient young men, of whom I am very proud, and they have always been supportive of me reaching my educational goals. My aunt Esther has read more of my papers and corrected more grammar errors than I could ever count. My sister, Terri, and a very close friend, Stephanie, have both helped me conquer endless pages of transcriptions. My devoted church family at The Gathering Place, in Critz, Virginia, has held me up in prayer, dried many tears, and cheered with every class and milestone that I have conquered. My final acknowledgement is for my dear friend and mentor, Susan Christian, who lost her courageous battle with cancer before I finished my work. Although she did not see me finish, she was always very encouraging to me from the very beginning of my educational journey. Even when she was suffering with her own physical afflictions, even before the cancer, she was always interested in my projects and classes. For her friendship, love, and support, I will be forever grateful.

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I would not have found participants for this study without assistance from the Great Expectations coaches in Virginia’s community colleges. To protect the privacy of the coaches, I have not named them or their schools, but I do appreciate each referral they provided. I would also like to recognize each of my 12 participants. Their unique experiences brought an added richness to this study; I could not have handpicked a better variety of stories. Their willingness to work with me to schedule interviews and participate in focus groups was very much appreciated. To each participant I would like to say, “Thank you, and God bless you.”

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS)

Attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD)

College Success Coaches Institute (CSCI)

Department of Social Services (DSS)

Education and Training Voucher (ETV)

Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017 (FFPSA)

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

Grade Point Average (GPA)

Great Expectations (GE)

National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC)

National Youth Transition Database (NYTD)

Open Home Foundation (OHF)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Youth Advisory Boards (YAB)

Youth Advisory Councils (YAC)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

Many Christian parents bring their newborn babies into their church shortly after birth and participate in a baby dedication service. It could be said that the church serves as the “village” referred to by the ancient saying, “It takes a village to raise a child.” During baby dedication ceremonies, congregations are also commissioned to support the parents in rearing the children according to biblical principles. This extended support will likely follow these Christian children throughout their lives in service to Christ. Unfortunately, children who enter foster care are not only missing basic parental support, they are not very likely to benefit from any “village” support system either. Therefore, when foster children reach their teenage years, they find themselves facing very insecure futures with limited supportive resources.

Qualitative studies that focus on the age out process for foster youth, particularly on youth who want to pursue secondary educational goals, add significant information to the educational field of research on both resilience and retention. Without a family to fall back on or turn to for support in troubling times, foster youth face substantial barriers to achieving higher educational goals. A better understanding of the individual barriers that foster youth face during the age out process could open additional resources to assist in providing a less traumatic transition. Of course, additional resources should be in the form of life-skills trainings in preparation for independent living situations rather than in the form of government assistance such as food stamps, housing, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF, formerly known as Welfare).

About 38,000 youth, which is close to 10% of the number of children in foster care, will age out of the system each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

Locally, especially in small rural communities, the number of youth exiting the system each year is a much smaller portion of this total; however, the smaller numbers for rural localities do not minimize the significance of barriers facing those who age out of foster care each year. Of the 442,995 children in foster care in 2017 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018), less than 11% will ever complete the level of a bachelor's degree (Salazar, 2013). Lower educational attainment has been directly connected to detrimental outcomes for secondary educational success in youth who age out of the foster care system (Gil-Kashiwabara, Hogansen, Geenen, Powers, & Powers, 2007; Greeson, Thompson, Ali, & Wenger, 2015; Thompson, Greeson, & Brunsink, 2016). Furthermore, the foster care system has been linked with homelessness (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Forenza & Lardier, 2017), unemployment and continued government assistance (Greeson & Thompson, 2016), continued involvement with the court system (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013), single parenthood (Greeson & Thompson, 2016), and unmet behavioral and psychological needs (Greeson & Thompson, 2014, 2016).

Departments of social service and independent child protective agencies, under the direction of the federal government, are charged with preparing foster youth for aging out of foster care (Title IV-E of the Fostering Connections Act, Sec. 201a and 202, as cited in Perfect, Stoll, Thompson, & Scott, 2013). By providing trainings that focus on the necessary independent living skills, the goal for foster youth is for them to be able to live independently from state services once they have aged out of care. A study of lived experiences allows participants to revisit and describe the phenomenon they have in common; likewise, phenomenological research aids in the understanding of the reality individuals have constructed for themselves (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). Human science researchers are then challenged to

describe awareness and understanding “in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection . . . a unity of the real and the ideal” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27).

In some cases, foster youth create a reality for themselves based on the ideals they have adopted from their experiences. The ideals may have realistic applications to life’s situations, but they may not be based on reality (Moustakas, 1994). Consider the attitudes and values public opinion places on the foster care system based on their assumptions of what they have heard the system offers children who are in need of guardianship (Miller & Owens, 2014). For the foster child aging out of care, the attitudes and values may be quite different based on the individual’s personal experience as it is experienced in the real world.

This chapter presents background information on the current foster care system including the rules and regulations generated by both state and federal guidelines that are relevant to the structure of this system. Additionally, current statistics relative to the number of children in foster care are discussed, along with the significance of those numbers to educational, economic status, and general well-being of foster youth who aged out of care. The historical, social, and theoretical aspects of aging out of foster care are presented within the background section of this chapter. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the problem statement and the purpose for this phenomenological study along with its significance to the researcher as well as to other educational and community stakeholders. The details of the central research question and sub-questions, definitions of key terms, and a summary conclude this chapter. Each of these aspects contribute to the challenge of retention at both high school and higher education levels, as well as post educational employment opportunities for foster youth.

### **Background**

As state and federal governments assume responsibility for abused, neglected, and

orphaned children, there are specific guidelines both public and private organizations are required to follow to better serve children in foster care. The U.S. Department of Education (2016) Foster Care Transition Toolkit states:

In an effort to improve outcomes for youth exiting foster care, federal law requires that child welfare agencies, caseworkers, or other child representatives as appropriate, assist and support youth exiting foster care to develop a transition plan. This transition plan must be developed during the 90 day period prior to your 18th birthday, or later, based on the “age out” policy for your state . . . or whether you are in extended foster care. Federal law also requires child welfare agencies to begin working with you beginning at age 14 to develop your plans for the services you will need as you transition to adulthood. (p. 7)

While it is the responsibility of the child welfare agency to provide transition tools and trainings, foster youth need to accept responsibility for their future pathway decisions. However, without support, foster youth are at an additional disadvantage for completing higher education programs (Day, Dworsky, & Feng, 2013; Greeson, 2013; Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, & Ali, 2014; Thompson et al., 2016; Thompson & Greeson, 2017). An amendment of the Social Security Act, Sec. 106 (a)(1), of P.L. 112-34, also required Title IV-B and IV-E agencies in each state to make a case plan to support educational stability of youth in foster care during every placement, not just the initial one (Perfect et al., 2013).

For the purposes of this research, to “emancipate” from care is defined as to leave the foster care system through the age out process, and “aging out” is defined as the termination of court jurisdiction over foster youth (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 6). The recognition of the age out process as a critical period of transition to adulthood for foster youth has been noted in numerous research studies (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Mahatmya &

Lohman, 2012; Salazar, 2013; Scannapieco, Smith, & Blakeney-Strong, 2016). The U.S. Department of Education Foster Care Transition Toolkit (2016) documents the age for leaving foster care as ranging from 19 to 23 as required by individual state mandates, with 41 states' foster care benefits ending at age 21.

## **Historical**

In the 70-year span from the 1850s to the 1930s, more than 200,000 immigrant children traveled from New York City to the westernmost parts of the country. The focus of the government was to find families to care for them through a system referred to as “placing out” (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014, p. 145). Many parents died during the journey to America; other parents simply sent their children away hoping they would be able to find a better life (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014). New York City needed a plan to deal with the social problem of caring for so many orphaned and abandoned children (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014). Placing children through this system meant the New York Children’s Aid Society (CAS) sent children to families that were located in 47 states, Indian Territories, and Canada in what was referred to as “Orphan Trains” (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014, p. 145; Guggenheim, 2015, p. 598).

The Foundling Hospital, operated and funded by Sisters of Charity in the middle of the 20th century, housed and adopted out abandoned and orphaned children (Frydl, 2014). Due to the postwar inpouring of immigrants to New York City, children in care included more African and Puerto Ricans, who in the eyes of the church, did not fit into the white ethnic dynamic of homes open to adoption (Frydl, 2014). The “white child” (p. 1707) was a political ideal that guided adoption and child welfare agencies in that the children were seen as redeemable and still human if they were portrayed as having “whiteness” (Pearson, 2014, p. 1707). The Children’s Aid Society, Jacob Riis, Hull House, and the United States Children’s Bureau each attempted to

help the children appear to have become part of society through colonization, redemption through missions, or the advancement of a Christian society, thus making them more appealing to the White families waiting to adopt (Pearson, 2014). The assimilation into U.S. culture began to lose its appeal during the post-Cold War period in the early 1960s (Winslow, 2016). By the 1970s, children's organizations turned to localities for assistance but still emphasized their commitment to Western parenting practices (Peacock, 2016).

More than 200,000 children leave the foster care system each year, with two years being the average time a child may spend receiving services (Chaney & Spell, 2015). Children exit the foster care system through adoption services, the return to their biological parents, or by aging out of the foster care system (Yang & Ortega, 2016). Today children may no longer be shipped across the country in "orphan trains" (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014, p. 145; Guggenheim, 2015, p. 598); however, they are sometimes placed in less than ideal situations in efforts to secure and provide for their immediate needs (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Although the intentions of the states is for the well-being and protection of the child, they are still unable to provide any guarantees that one situation will provide better than another; they can only use their best judgments at the time (Guggenheim, 2015).

## **Social**

Healthy levels of self-determination better position foster youth to shape their life course as they wish, rather than succumbing to chance and circumstance to dictate their futures (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Current research has not given voice to foster youth who have aged out of care related to their independent living skills, nor to their preparation for post-secondary educational programs (Strolin-Goltzman, Woodhouse, Suter, & Werrbach, 2016). However, the Strolin-Goltzman et al. (2016) study did indicate that caring and involved social workers made a highly

positive impact on the transition of youth to higher educational programs. The age out process needs additional research to recognize the unique influences of foster parents, higher education resources, and educational experiences of caregivers to promote other intervention programs aimed at foster youth high school graduation rates and college success (Geenen et al., 2015). A better understanding of the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of care may add valuable and critical information to the current literature that describes the barriers to obtaining higher education and successful autonomy.

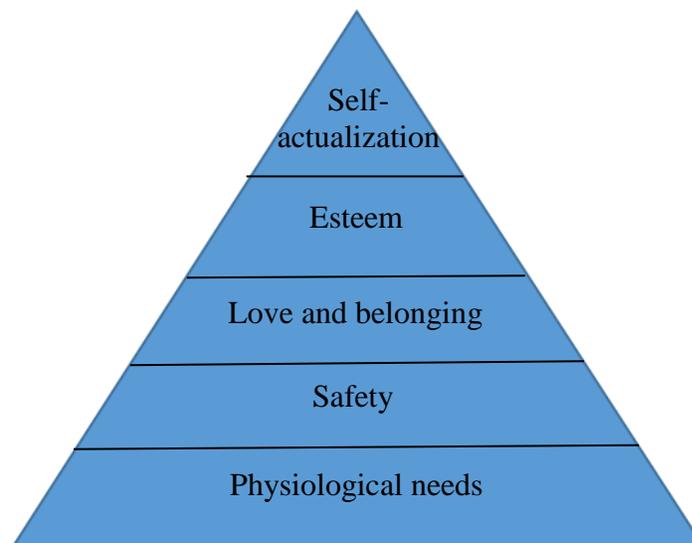
Foster youth, when compared to youth of the same socioeconomic status who were not in foster care, were 50% less likely to graduate on time from high school (Geenen et al., 2015). When the same group was surveyed again six to eight years later, still 20% of former foster youth had not completed a GED as opposed to only 6% of those of the general population (Geenen et al., 2015). Minimal personal narratives of foster youth who attended postsecondary educational institutions and quantitative data related to students' success are currently available (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016).

While quantitative data provide valuable information related to the success of foster youth in higher education programs, the data do not speak to the process of interpretative research (Gall et al., 2007) that describes the lives of foster youth as they acquire independent living skills and exit the foster care system. Personal accounts of phenomena are vital additions of imagination and emotion which contribute to the depth and richness of qualitative research (Moustakas, 1994). These perspectives allow educators to narrow the indicators of negative outcomes for older youth who age out of foster care. While younger children do experience some of the negative aspects of being in the foster care system, older children are reported to

have more destructive and long-term social outcomes (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Lee & Berrick, 2014).

### **Theoretical**

Due to the natural survival instincts that are innately humanistic, it is obvious that young adults will strive to meet their most basic needs before pursuing educational aspirations. Funding is available from multiple resources to support foster youth in higher education. Unfortunately, housing assistance in rural areas is not a viable option. Therefore, foster youth must first meet the basic provision of shelter before they consider becoming students in higher education programs. Additionally, food and clothing continue to be challenging for foster youth, which are also among the most basic of needs (Maslow, 1970). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory states that human needs must be met in a specific order (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; see Figure 1).



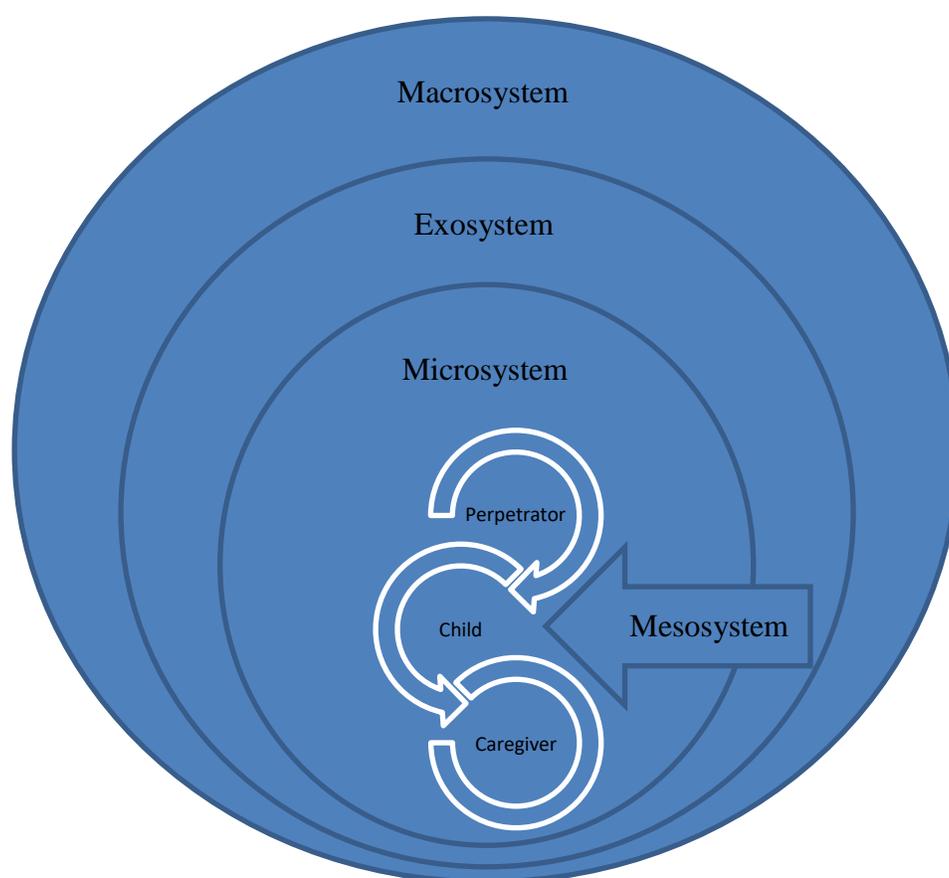
*Figure 1.* Visual presentation of Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs.

Maslow's theory (1970) stated the bottom of the pyramid was the most important survival needs and he believed few people ever reach self-actualization at the top. While basic

needs are identified as motivators and drives that cause people to act, higher needs that are less relevant for survival become less urgent (Maslow, 1970). The level of importance the need is to the individual becomes the drive that motivates the individual to obtain that need. Foster youth who age out before they are prepared physically, emotionally, and socially for independent living, struggle in meeting their basic needs; therefore, achieving a higher-level need, such as a college degree, seems an impossible goal. “Deprivation of higher needs does not produce so desperate a defense and emergency reaction as is produced by lower deprivations” (Maslow, 1970, p. 98).

The plight of foster youth aging out of the system presents a problem to their community that can be described utilizing Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory as he explains, “Human development is a product of interaction between the growing human organism and its environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 16). Just as the environment provides the means for nurture and growth, it may also be lacking in those essential needs. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological system consists of nested layers, each one contained in the next, with the layer directly surrounding the individual identified as the microsystem. This layer is where daily interactions occur with other people, the home, family, childcare centers, and playgrounds (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Unfortunately for foster children, this area of expected safety and basic need center is their layer of dysfunction. The second layer, identified as the mesosystem, involves two or more relationships such as that which exists between the home, school, neighborhoods, and friends (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The next layer is the exosystem, and it involves the settings that indirectly impact the child, such as where the parents work or the classroom of an older sibling (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The final layer or outer covering is the macrosystem, which includes the culture, beliefs, and ideals as a whole that influence individuals

on a larger scale (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This ecological theory is especially relevant to children in the foster care system as people operating in the exosystem, whom the children have never met, often make the decisions that directly affect their immediate microsystem. Exosystem decisions are made for foster children based on macrosystem values and beliefs, of which most children are too young to understand. Often the most psychological and physical damage occurs in the safety zone. Figure 2 presents a visual of the interaction between the four layers of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory.



*Figure 2.* The nested layers within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological system theory.

### **Situation to Self**

The interest in the foster care system has touched American lives for centuries. Compassion for those less fortunate, especially children, moves Christians to action. In Deuteronomy 15:7–8 the Bible instructs, “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren within any of the gates in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs” (New King James Version). Through these instructions, humanity is drawn continually to children in need of protection, provision, nurturing, and guidance. Families make sacrifices to bring abused, neglected, and orphaned children in their homes and provide, as they are able, the missing elements of family membership and support.

In Matthew 26:11 Jesus said, “For you have the poor with you always” (New King James Version).” Jesus’ statement included poor children who could not provide for their own personal needs as well as adults who could not support themselves or their children. That statement also applies to the responsibility states have appropriated to their respective social service departments. Today local departments of social service (DSS) agencies oversee the care and provisions for abused and neglected children. The state of Virginia has determined that children age 6 or younger are at the highest risk for abuse and neglect and therefore consider any case involving young children a top priority for investigations (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2017). Children whose lives are far less than what is expected by American family standards typically become involved with social services at some point. It is important to note that DSS training emphasizes the importance of social workers to recognize the difference in abused and neglected children and those belonging to poor families just trying to survive. In the

latter case, it is the goal of the DSS agency to lead the family to resources rather than remove the children from the home.

The philosophical assumption of methodology was used for this study. As the emerging themes for participants of the age out process surfaced, inductive analysis was the first method that guided the analysis of collected data (Creswell, 2013). For example, the first assumption for this study was that foster children were not provided the necessary life skills to live independently prior to aging out of care. The methodology of conducting this study through interview interpretation, emerging themes from focus groups, and inductive analysis utilized an emerging theme, or themes, design. As themes emerged, it became necessary to slightly adjust interview questions to stay focused on the central research question and sub questions (Creswell, 2013). However, interviews for this study revealed that youth in some instances were provided instructions related to life-lessons, but they simply did not apply those lessons to their situation and resorted to other means of survival (Schwandt, 2015). It was also relevant that participants who recalled instruction in life-lessons also recalled that the lessons were not presented at a practical time in their lives and were dismissed by participants as irrelevant. In such cases, the interview questions were adjusted to reveal the deeper issues that hindered some foster youth from thriving after leaving foster care (see Appendix C for interview questions). Probing deeper into the particular rather than the generalized details kept the study focused during the interviews and focus groups sessions (Creswell, 2013).

This brief personal history indicates why this researcher was so motivated to conduct this study on the age out process of foster youth. By using an epistemological assumption, the researcher aimed to grow closer to the participants in order to better understand the age out process from their perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Understanding another perspective for this

group of participants was not without challenges, particularly when some justifications for particular perspectives ignored Christian values and beliefs. It was important to note that, exploring the nature of knowledge based on the experiences of participants (Schwandt, 2015), their justification of understanding at times differed significantly from that of the researcher.

It was also important to recognize that some preconceived ideals related to the foster care system and the age out process existed due to the researcher's intensive connections with the system, as both a former foster parent and DSS employee. The intention for this study, however, used a constructivist paradigm in which understanding was derived from the participants' complex experiences rather than a few tightly defined categories (Creswell, 2013). Husserl's method of bracketing was used to reduce the researcher's preconceptions into categories and limit personal ideas from the data gathering process and to investigate only that which was thought or understood by the participants (Schwandt, 2015).

What makes foster youth stand apart from other young adults preparing for independent living is the lack of mentoring and familial relations to provide additional emotional and financial support (Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). The goal of this research was to give voice to foster youth in rural areas of southern Virginia, as related to their age out experiences. This study highlighted weaknesses in trainings and serves as a guide to the enhancement of present and future emancipation programs. By providing foster youth an opportunity to speak to their age out experiences, this study contributed unique voices to current research. Further, the findings of this study could result in a review of the transition process and lead to revised and improved trainings for all stakeholders in the foster care system. While this unique group of participants shared the same lived phenomenon, each one viewed his or her situation from multiple realities (Creswell, 2013).

## **Problem Statement**

The most current statistics on the number of children in foster care revealed that on August 10, 2018, there were 442,995 children receiving adoption or protective services from social service organizations across the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Of this number of children, nearly 9% (37,779) were of the legal age to leave foster care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Local departments of social services and independent child protective agencies, under the direction of the federal government, are charged with preparing foster youth with the necessary independent living skills they will need prior to leaving care services (Perfect et al., 2013). Of those who age out of care, fewer than 11% (roughly 47,070 youth emancipated from foster care each year) will ever complete a bachelor's degree (Salazar, 2013). The number of children in care between 2014–2015 increased by 12,781 children; however, in the following years from 2015–2017, the total of children entering foster care each year declined (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018).

The current problem is that as many as 40,000 youth each year are at, or nearing, the legal age to leave the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2018). Of this population of youth entering independence and adulthood, few will earn a high school diploma and even fewer will pursue higher education (Salazar et al., 2016). Furthermore, youth in the foster care system are “ten times more likely to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder” and other disorders including suicide ideations than children who never entered care (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014, p.1). Additionally, these data may not accurately reflect the true number of children who ever received care services as the daily and annual estimates do not include experience with child services throughout childhood (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014).

Current research has not given voice to foster youth who have aged out of care (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016), related to their instruction of independent living skills (Batsche et al., 2014; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013), nor to their preparation for post-secondary educational programs (Day et al., 2013; Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2015; Salazar, 2012, 2013; Salazar et al., 2016). The target population for this study was former foster youth between the ages of 18 and 26. Participants were selected from current community college or recent college or high school graduates, as well as those who began but did not complete a program for higher education. Additionally, foster alumni students who graduated from technical programs were eligible to participate in this study through snowball sampling methods of reaching other foster alumni through existing participants (Creswell, 2013). This purposeful sample of participants who had experienced the same phenomenon of aging out of foster care added valuable insights to current research in the understanding of this process (Creswell, 2013).

Due to fewer opportunities for workforce training and employment in rural areas, this study recruited participants from rural areas of south side Virginia. Foster youth are especially susceptible to poor postsecondary educational outcomes, both as a result of the dysfunctional family and the high numbers of foster youth diagnosed as having some type of disability (Perfect et al., 2013). Current statistics are largely derived from a longitudinal quantitative study known as the Midwest Study, which was conducted in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Curry & Abrams, 2015; Geenen et al., 2015). Furthermore, few studies follow foster youth into adulthood and even fewer studies focus on adult outcomes related to educational levels (Salazar, 2013). The gap in the research was that there were no phenomenological studies that gave voice to foster youth to describe individual and unique transitions to independent living and connections to postsecondary education.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of foster youth who aged out of foster care in rural southern areas of Virginia. A transcendental phenomenological study first identified the phenomena (Creswell, 2013); for this study, the shared phenomena was aging out of foster care and seeking post-secondary education. The second step of this study included bracketing, a method introduced by Moustakas (1994) to exclude the researcher's personal bias from experience and only include findings from participants' experiences. The third step included the recruitment of participants. As generally required for phenomenological studies, a minimum of 12 to 15 participants who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), aging out of foster care and enrolling in community college, were recruited to participate in the study. The final step in a transcendental phenomenology was the compilation, transcription, review and analysis of the collected data. The process of analyzing the data collected included the reduction of interview statements and combination of similar statements to emerging themes (Creswell, 2013).

At this stage in the research, the independent living process for foster youth was generally defined as aging out, meaning foster youth who were no longer considered to be a ward of the state (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), nor were they the responsibility of any of their former foster families. One theory guiding this study was Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, as it provided a framework to understand the motives of foster youth who made certain life decisions that determined the path for their future. A second foundational theory that had relevance for this study was Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of the influence of context and environment on individuals (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chaney & Spell, 2015).

### **Significance of the Study**

This empirical phenomenological study provided an opportunity for the researcher and participants to return to the experience and describe events at their very essence (Moustakas, 1994). Two levels of an empirical phenomenological study include responses to open-ended questions or probes and structures of the experience as analyzed by the researcher's account of participants' stories to derive general or universal meanings (Moustakas, 1994). The theoretical significance of this study was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theories. Maslow's theory was relevant to this study as he applied fulfillment of meeting one's basic needs prior to advancing to higher levels of happiness in life (Pfeifer, 1998). By including Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, this study examined additional factors, such as "differential patterns of socialization within the family" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 244), which surrounded foster youth as they prepared for independence. Data collected by conducting interviews provided practical insights to additional variables of foster youth in care services not addressed in previous studies (Geenen et al., 2015). The current National Youth Transition Database (NYTD) does not track youth past the age of 21; therefore, the system fails to provide data on emerging young adults or discern their self-sufficiency post foster care (Scannapieco et al., 2016).

The empirical significance of this study gave voice to foster youth who experienced the age out process and who may currently be struggling with problems related to events that led to their becoming a ward of the state. The stakeholders who benefit from this study include educators, social workers, local, state, and federal governments, as well as community organizations and the workforce in general (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). Young adults who are not prepared for independence often leave home only to return to their parents' home before

branching out again (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Foster youth who find themselves without means of support, or basic food and shelter, do not have families to rely on for support, nor can they re-enter the foster system, as the state is no longer responsible for their well-being (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2014; Lee & Berrick, 2014; Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016; Scannapieco et al., 2016; Thompson et al., 2016).

This study contributes findings that could lead to future improvements for the emancipation process for DSS. Furthermore, it provides thick, rich qualitative data shared by participants related to their encounters with child welfare agencies, foster parents, and biological parents as well as kinship caregivers. Salazar (2013) found that postsecondary educational outcomes based on degree completion and employment for foster alumni as compared to a cohort of students from the general population indicated relatively high levels of job security for both foster alumni and general population participants; however, general population participants' scores were statistically significantly higher on both measures than scores for foster alumni. The focus was not on the experiences of foster alumni participants, nor did it consider the impact that age out experiences had on their postsecondary education (Salazar, 2013). Improving the emancipation process for foster youth may provide necessary life skills that prepare them to become self-reliant members of society who are well-informed advocates for their own success (Salazar, 2013). While the desire for young people and their caregivers is for them to achieve autonomy, it is still important for young adults to continue to have the support of caring adults in their lives (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, Thompson, & Courtney, 2015).

The practical application of this study was to reveal the experiences of the age out process from the perspective of foster youth themselves. By contributing to this field of research, this study may have a positive impact on the foster care system, youth in care who are

about to age out, institutions of higher education, the future workforce, and communities as a whole (Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2015; Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012). Better understanding the mindset of foster youth aids in the construction and evaluation of curriculum used to teach independent living skills (Dolan & Grotevant, 2014). Consider for a moment the foster student who makes passing grades, causes no trouble at school or in the foster home, and seems to be compliant and well adjusted. However, this student graduates from high school, cannot keep steady employment, and once again turns to the state for assistance to meet the very basic living needs of food, clothing, and shelter (Maslow, 1970). Situations such as this create disruption in the age out transition for foster youth. Perhaps this student needed counseling while in high school to nurture positive thinking (Geenen, Powers, & Phillips, 2015), or more intensive training to redirect the dependent nature that was created, although unintentionally, by the foster care system. Revelations in the age out process for 12 former foster youth may not change the system or age out process for all foster youth; still this study provides valuable insights to the thinking minds of foster youth and gives voice to how they internally processed their transition to independent living.

### **Research Questions**

To better explore the purpose of this study, the following central research question and three sub questions framed the research: Central Research Question: What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college?

This transcendental phenomenology not only gave voice to participants who experienced the age out process, it identified presuppositions about the age out process and accurately reported the experiences according to participants. This study provided “a more holistic approach to addressing the needs and experiences of youth during this time” (Lee & Berrick,

2014, p. 82). Intangible resources such as self-efficacy, self-direction, resilience, and confidence are also necessary qualities for youth who are about to gain independence (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Sub question one: How do participants describe the influence of the age out process on their life decisions?

Social support is a relatively new theory in the field of social psychology (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Three common attributes of social support theory include emotional support, which includes caring, listening, and empathy; instrumental support, which includes tangible goods, services, or aids, and may include transportation, or lending money; and informational support, which includes problem-solving resolutions, or affirmational support (Curry, & Abrams, 2015). Family history and stability are additional considerations as to the type and amount of social support foster youth will need pertaining to housing and making reasonable decisions (Curry & Abrams, 2015). Family history, even for a child who was removed from home at a relatively early age, still has a profound and long-lasting impact when the child becomes an adult. By better understanding the family dynamic, social workers, teachers, coaches, and foster youth themselves understand barriers they face and what will be required of them to overcome those barriers.

Sub question two: What is the participants' perceived role of the state in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?

The focus of governmental administration over the past 30 years has been on finding jobs and managing budgets (Lee & Berrick, 2014). It is still unclear as to the effectiveness of these programs due to sporadic program implementation and few rigorous program evaluations (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Evidence of hardships facing foster youth aging out of care continues at a rate that indicates current programs fail to prepare foster youth to live adequately on their own (Lee

& Berrick, 2014). Perhaps the cause of this failure is more about needing to understand the foster youths' perspective and less about the quality of state programs.

Sub question three: How do participants describe the role of foster parents, guardians, and kinship caregivers in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?

Attachments with foster parents are easier for young children placed in care; however, older children require more time to adapt to their new environment and to build trusting relationships (Van Andel, Grietens, Strijker, Van der Gaag, & Knorth, 2014). Because foster parents are trained to limit attachments with foster children, and conflicting directions are given to foster children, "An intervention should help foster parents learn to deal with this dilemma and help the child cope with uncertainty" (Van Andel et al., 2014, p. 153). This study looked at the foster youths' relationships and roles with foster parents and offered the perspective from the child who was in care as to the family relationship aspect of foster care placement.

### **Definitions**

1. *Age out* – Age out refers to the termination of court jurisdiction over foster care youths (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
2. *Emancipate* – To "age out" and leave the foster care system (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
3. *Transition plan* – A transition plan describes an individual's goals as well as the actions and supports required to achieve those goals as they transition out of foster care (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
4. *Ward of the court* – A child becomes a ward of the court when the court system assumes responsibility for a child who is under the age of 18, due to abuse, neglect, or a parent's inability to properly care for the child; used specifically related to references on the Free

Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) application that indicates the applicant was in foster care (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

5. *Child welfare agency* – The state, tribal, or local agency responsible for the placement and care of children and youth in foster care (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).
6. *Foster care* – A circumstance in which a child lives with and is cared for by people who are not the child's parents, usually for a limited time period (Foster Care, n.d.).

### **Summary**

Local DSS agencies are responsible for the children placed in their care as they become referred to as wards of the court. This occurs when the responsibility of primary childcare was removed from the parent or parents and placed within the court system. All decisions concerning placement for the child is then recommended by the agency, approved or revised and ordered by the court. The foster parents then provide for all immediate needs of the child as the child is assimilated into the foster family.

Federal mandates have been established to guide agencies in the preparation of foster youth who will age out of foster care without returning to either parent before the age of 18. Current research is lacking in qualitative studies that specifically give a voice to foster youth describing their unique preparations for independent living. The purpose of this study was to provide an opportunity for foster youth to express their views on the process of aging out as related to their personal experiences. It was the expressed intention that this study would be used to inform the public view of the real-life experiences of aging out of foster care, add to the literature, and serve to improve the process for future emancipated youth.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

For centuries, nations have faced the dilemma of providing proper care for their orphaned or neglected and abused children. Recent research has revealed that kinship care provides children in need with significant benefits when government intervention is required for their care (Blakely, Leon, Fuller, & Jhe Bai, 2017; Hunter, Monroe, & Garand, 2014). However, in the mid to late 1800s and early 1900s many children were without relatives willing to take responsibility for them; therefore, most children were admitted to group homes. The early establishment of group homes were governed by a director or caregiver who supervised the children and provided for their basic needs. Many group home settings in the early years resembled institutions more than homes, and the caregivers typically did not have families of their own. Therefore, caregivers in group homes were able to provide fulltime supervision to children in their care. Group homes and foster care placements today not only provide services for orphaned children, resources are also extended through federal, state, and privately governed agencies to children who have experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, or abandonment (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016).

Important resources for displaced children include kinship care providers; however, children are less likely to be placed in kinship homes than in traditional foster homes (Blakely et al., 2017; Font, 2014; Hunter et al., 2014). Unfortunately, barriers still exist that prevent foster children from being placed with family and further hinder potential relatives from offering to open their homes in removal situations. There are familial factors, such as a history of substance abuse, that sometimes make out-of-home placements the best selection for the child (Forenza, & Happonen, 2016). Additionally, intrastate barriers as well as family history of substance abuse, a

history of physical or mental illness, or an otherwise questionable background, would prevent children from being placed with kin even if the family members are willing to care for the children (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Another factor hindering kinship placement is the lack of available respite care and support from DSS agencies (Madden et al., 2016). Still, current research indicates that kinship placements are in the best interest of the child whenever possible (Hunter et al., 2014). “Children who experience family complexity and fluidity tend to exhibit poorer average health . . . In part, this reflects differences in . . . financial and behavioral resources; family complexity and fluidity are particularly common among poorer families” (Berger, & Font, 2015, p. 160); these are important factors to consider prior to placing children with relatives. Research also suggests foster youth who reside with relatives will exhibit lower levels of psychopathology (Blakely et al., 2017). Individual strengths help some children cope with trauma and lower risky behaviors, such as attempts of harm to self or others, when placed with family members (Blakely et al., 2017).

An additional concern is that in some state agencies, guidelines prevent extending financial support when placing children with relatives (Font, 2014). Other barriers include healthcare, adequate training of relatives providing care, and the expense and approval of transporting children to other states. Representative Vern Buchanan sponsored the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2017 (FFPSA), which was introduced to the House on January 4, 2017. The bill presented the following amendments:

Foster Care and Adoption Assistance of title IV of the Social Security Act (SSAct) regarding, among other matters: (1) mental health and substance abuse prevention and treatment services and in-home parenting skill-based programs, (2) foster care maintenance payments for children with parents in a licensed residential family-based

treatment facility for substance abuse, and (3) payments for evidence-based kinship navigator programs.

The amended bill included an interstate system to expedite placement with family members who reside in a different state than the child, time limits for children to be returned to their parents, and funding to recruit and train high-quality foster families.

This vital service to care for abused, neglected, abandoned, and orphaned children is important to educational institutions, especially institutions of higher education. Other stakeholders include the community organizations, local workforce, and social service programs that are funded by local, state, and federal governments. Because the transition to higher education generally begins at the community college, it is important to focus on secondary educational programs. Current literature on foster care has shown the need for programs that address specific challenges of aging out, programs that equip foster youth with basic independent living skills, employment skills, and how to maintain a life of healthy well-being (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016).

Research in the field of foster care reviewed here was specific to older foster youth and their crucial transition to independent living (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017). Because it was important to consider the history of placement for foster youth, such as the age of entry to foster care and the number of school and home placements, this chapter also reviewed the impact of those placements and the duration of being in foster care (Forenza, & Happonen, 2016). The following section of this chapter provides the theoretical framework that served as a basis for this study. Maslow's hierarchy of needs provided a theoretical foundation that supported descriptions of the desperate situations that exists for many foster youth who are about to age out of foster care (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was also

relevant to this study as it related to supporting factors of the ecological systems surrounding a growing population of foster youth who leave the security of their foster care families and enter the workforce each year.

The theoretical framework is followed by the section of related literature, which includes current research on foster care and the age out process as it affects teens and young adults while they transition from foster care to independent living. It is also important to discuss the number of children currently involved in the foster care system as well as an estimation of how many foster youth transition from care to independent living each year; this is addressed within the related literature section. As this population of young adults enters the workforce and society as a whole, it is important to consider their prospects for a successful future. Some foster youth find it difficult to separate from a system that has provided for their basic needs such as food, clothing, and shelter for many years of their lives, especially without family to support them during their transition (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Within the related literature section, three subcategories are included to describe transition programs, mentoring, and behavior modifications. After presenting the related literature on difficulties involving the transition to independence, transition programs, the many benefits of mentoring, and behavior modification, a summary is provided to recap the focus of this proposed study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that served as the primary guide for this study was based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1968, 1970; Pfeifer, 1998). Maslow's theory was founded on one's ability to find true happiness from one's life (Maslow, 1968). For youth in foster care, the very basic foundational familial support system is missing from their lives. While children are encouraged to bond with their foster families, foster care training workshops

discourage foster parents from becoming too attached to children placed in their care, creating a conflict in emotional attachments (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Troughton, 2013). One child may have experienced positive emotional attachments with a foster placement, while another may consider the placement as harmful as the situation from which the child was removed.

True happiness, or self-actualization as Maslow (1968) labeled the upper level tier, is only achieved by a modest margin of the population who are considered by empirical research to be flourishing (Middleton, 2016). The theoretical framework of Maslow's hierarchy of needs provides the guide for examining and understanding strengths and shortcomings that concern matters of humanity (Middleton, 2016). Maslow focused on the individual's drive to move towards self-fulfillment, and today's media market takes full advantage of that vulnerability, offering easy access to sources designed to provide immediate gratification (Middleton, 2016).

Maslow's theory was relative to foster youth who have, or are about to, age out of foster care and for the first time must provide for their basic physiological needs. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory begins with the most basic survival needs: "food, drink, and sexual appetite, needs for safety, needs for love, acceptance and belongingness, needs for esteem, approval and recognition to self-actualization" (Middleton, 2016, p. 134). This quest for meeting the survival needs of foster youth is often the barrier that hinders their steps up the hierarchy to self-actualization. How foster youth process and react to their foster care experiences of posttraumatic growth is often a predictor that determines their achieved level of psychological well-being (Middleton, 2016).

The transcendental phenomenological approach of this study allowed participants the opportunity to share their unique experiences as they aged out of the foster care system. It also provided an opportunity to identify other gaps in the research, programs for aging out, and

possibly legislative moves toward other protective and preventive factors for foster youth. While this method focused specifically on emerging themes, it also allowed participants to elaborate on their personal experience and added valuable information to the current research (Geenen et al., 2015). Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs theory provided a method for revealing underlying reasons foster youth make certain life decisions that hinder the postsecondary education process. Real life stories brought a richness to the data that were not captured in previous quantitative statistical studies (Scales & Scales, 2016).

A holistic approach that focused on the experiences of foster youth as related to job search, budgeting, and self-sufficiency added knowledge that could lead to the enhancement of programs that provide a more stable age out transition (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory brought attention to the value of the environment in which the foster children live and the value of relationships with people who had the greatest impact on their development (Chaney & Spell, 2015) and provided a framework for a more holistic view of the participants' age out experiences. The Bronfenbrenner ecological systems theory also helped guide this study to examine the resources surrounding the family and the support systems, or lack thereof, which contributed to the choices of adult participants.

### **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs**

The primary theorist for this proposal was Abraham Maslow, who considered the theories of many other theorists when formulating his hierarchy of needs theory. He attributed portions of his research to contributions from Jung, Freud, Rogers, Adler, Fromm, Horney, etc., whose ideas were all relevant to Maslow during his early stages as they related to both sides of human reactions, which he referred to as a holistic-dynamic theory (Ewen, 1993; Maslow, 1970). Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory was based on what one requires to be truly happy in life,

beginning with the physiological necessities such as food, shelter, and clothing, and ending with intellectual and creative needs, which he referred to as self-actualization (Maslow, 1968).

Maslow used a pyramid to describe his hierarchy of needs with the base containing the most basic and supportive human needs (Maslow, 1943/2013). Maslow's primary levels of human necessities was a major focus; however, as higher-level stages emerged, these transitions provided relevant data for this study. It was important to compare the perception of the participants' lives to the upper tiers of Maslow's theory and explore how participants viewed the quality of their outcomes as compared to the reality of their level of self-actualization.

Foster care is a traumatic event for children of any age to endure. Flourishing after experiencing a distressing event may rest in finding the benefit following the trauma (Middleton, 2016). How foster children respond to removal from their home and placement in foster care can be determined through approach-oriented coping or avoidance-oriented coping (Middleton, 2016). Evidence abounds that points to youth electing avoidance-oriented coping through drugs and alcohol, which help to suppress feelings and strong emotions rather than expressing and managing them (Middleton, 2016). Foster youth grow from their experiences in foster care as they determine to flourish in the direction of their future, or they allow themselves to remain victims of circumstances and continue to blame the foster care system (Middleton, 2016). Maslow determined from his research that life's most valuable lessons were birthed from life's tragedies, death, and traumas that bring new perspectives to guide individuals in the achievement of self-actualization (Middleton, 2016).

Growth from traumatic experiences is best understood through evidence in "personal development and self-realization" (Middleton, 2016 p. 142) as the individual makes an internalized decision to creatively adjust his or her outcomes. While the foster care system is

mandated to assume responsibility for children who become a ward of the court, the responsibility for personal growth is within each child who enters foster care. It is the role of the therapist to provide “supportive, reliable, and non-critical relationships” (Middleton, 2016, p. 142); however, it is not their role to assume full responsibility as the instrument for the outcomes.

As stated previously, Maslow (1968) used a pyramid design to demonstrate his hierarchy of needs theory. The base of the pyramid was the foundational support of the happy and healthy individual and consisted of physiological needs such as food, shelter, water, and air (Pfeifer, 1998). Once these survival needs were met, individuals would strive to reach the next need level. The most important need as Maslow described was for safety; not only safety from harm or harsh elements, but safety also extended into the realm of job security and living in a secure and safe dwelling (Pfeifer, 1998). As one would climb the pyramid of needs he or she would also seek belonging needs such as love; esteem needs, such as respect in one’s community; and finally cognitive needs, such as the understanding of the world or self-actualization (Pfeifer, 1998).

Maslow (1968) believed few people ever reach the highest level of need, self-actualization, because they concentrate too heavily on lower level needs for safety and basic survival. The expression “living paycheck-to-paycheck” could help reason as to how socioeconomic status may play a significant role in the ability to move through Maslow’s stages of needs, particularly for someone who has exited the foster care system. Empirical research supports Maslow’s assumption as it indicates that only a modest portion of the population based on income levels are actually flourishing (Middleton, 2016). This information also resonates for

foster youth who age out of care as a major struggle they face is in satisfying their basic lower level needs (Richards, 2014).

Maslow believed man generally feels that he is unworthy to lead a full and happy life because he has allowed his talents to go to waste (Maslow, 1968). Many religions of the world such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam speak of the human suffering and self-denial (Middleton, 2016). This idea is pertinent to foster youth who are about to age out and have the opportunity to go to college, an opportunity rarely sought after by their parents. The opportunity to have something their parents did not have brings feelings of a “devalued self” resulting in self-assigned lower social standings for foster youth, which is often detrimental to their success in higher educational endeavors (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs was based on humanistic and behavioristic theories. Maslow wanted to explore what made people happy. He studied his own children early on, but was deeply moved by human suffering during a time of war. He then determined to discover what people needed to lead full and satisfying lives. Physiological needs and safety needs were at the foundation of this theory (Maslow, 1943/2013). Maslow believed that once those needs were met, people moved into the higher levels of happiness (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1943/2013). “The first thing the intellect does with an object is to class it with something else” (James, 1902, as cited in Maslow, 1968, p. 127). “Deprivation of higher needs does not produce so desperate a defense and emergency reaction as is produced by lower deprivations. Respect is a dispensable luxury when compared to food and safety” (Maslow, 1970, p. 98). Foster youth may tend to appear disrespectful to authorities such as social workers, foster parents, law enforcement, and other authority figures due to the abrupt disruption to their food and safety, or basic needs network (Richards, 2014). The initial disruption to the food and safety network is

often followed by subsequent removals and placement into new homes with new families; therefore, children must adapt to new environments quickly (Hunter et al., 2014). These transitions typically lead to the creation of numerous behavioral problems in foster children and for the foster families as well (Van Andel et al., 2014).

As a foundational theory for this study, it is important to examine how the lives of foster children align with Maslow's theory of human survival and what was actually of the highest importance to this population of foster youth. Do foster youth focus on their survival, meeting their immediate basic needs, a sense of belonging, a future, or simply survival for the day? In their search for spiritual guidance, it is possible foster youth endure feelings of guilt that they were somehow responsible for their current situation, and perhaps have not yet suffered enough for what they have done, which can hinder their ability to adapt and make sense of the situation (Middleton, 2016).

Children in foster care suffer separation anxiety from their home environment. Even when that environment is not healthy, it is what is familiar to them (Van Andel et al., 2014). When children are removed from the only home they have known, they lose their sense of security and belonging, even if no real security or belonging ever existed. When children are taken into foster care, they are stripped of their autonomy, even if only temporarily. Therefore, they must relinquish their autonomy to the unknown just to become safe, to have their needs met, and realistically improve their outcomes (Middleton, 2016).

It was important to this study to focus on the specific needs that were being fulfilled for foster youth at the time they aged out of the foster care system and the impact that transition made on their sense of well-being and happiness (Maslow, 1970). It was also important to distinguish between needs that were met by their state agencies or foster families, and those the

foster youth provided for themselves perhaps through joining the workforce, military service, or through independent living programs (Batsche et al., 2014). Much like refugees who flee their country and seek asylum, foster youth must assimilate to the culture and the home of their assigned foster parents. To assimilate with a new family, foster youth must conform to the culture of the home in “experiences related to changes in beliefs, personal relational styles, behavior, thoughts, values” (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017, p. 64). Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory approached human motivation based on meeting goals and survival needs, and his ideals have been applied to a variety of populations including children in crisis (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017).

It was necessary in this study to avoid bias that was evident through the pyramid model of the hierarchy (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). While the basic needs identified were in fact universal, Tay and Diener’s 2011 study found that differences in cultures and individual situations impacted the order of the hierarchy (as cited in Lonn & Dantzler, 2017). As applied to situations of youth exiting foster care, the most important issues for them may not be physiological needs, but for relationships, support, and acceptance of the adults they are striving to become.

Children who were removed from their home due to neglectful situations may have a significantly different hierarchy of needs compared with those who were removed for sexual or physical abuse. Often sexual abuse is accompanied with intimidation or grooming techniques that may not be visually apparent as in neglect or physical abuse with visible conditions. Still another removal situation to consider is that of the orphan, who would also be dealing with the death of a parent or both parents. Regardless of the circumstances, it is important to recognize “contextually-based needs” (Lonn & Dantzler, 2017, p. 70) at the various levels of the hierarchy.

## **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was instrumental in researching the developmental influences that shaped the emerging foster youth through environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's theory consists of the microsystem, which encompasses the individual: male, female, age, health conditions, and the single setting of the developing individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem includes the next layer of the environment in which interactions occur such as school, work, playgrounds, shopping malls, etc. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The exosystem reaches further into the community, but is still relevant to support for the individual, such as the workplace of a parent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The macrosystem is the outer system that provides more guidance for an individual than a direct impact, such as religion, government systems, and other cultural influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Chaney & Spell, 2015). The chronosystem was identified as the various transitions of life as the individual matures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The microsystem is the family, school, peers, workplace, and neighborhood where the individual spends most of his or her time (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). As the microsystem is in a dysfunctional state for foster youth, focusing on this realm of the ecological system theory may contribute valuable data to current research and was specific to this study. While the larger systems were certainly relevant to the development of foster children and their provisions of resources to the additional barriers they face through transitions, the microsystem first fails to support healthy emotional and physical well-being of the early childhood development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

It is within the microsystem that situations become open for the sexual abuse of minor children (Hassan, Gary, Killion, Lewin, & Totten, 2015). Both the perpetrator and the child-

victim cross paths in this inner system and have a sense of safety; the child in the protection of their home or neighborhood, and for the perpetrator in not getting caught (Hassan et al., 2015). The mesosystem consists of the overlap of relationships within the microsystem (Hassan et al., 2015). Interrelationships with home and school, or school and peers, within the mesosystem affect the transition processes for foster youth, with or without disabilities, by either creating or overcoming barriers (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007). Due to the vulnerability of sexually abused children, six children out of 82 in the study conducted by Hassan et al. (2015) reported sexual abuse by more than one perpetrator. In 2009 the Centers for Disease Control reported that 7.4% of high school students were victims of unwanted sexual intercourse by force (Perry-Burney, Thomas, & McDonald, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner described psychological study as “the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest periods of time” (as cited in Tregaskis, 2015, p. 14). Making sense of the strangeness in life is embedded in the transitions described in the chronosystem; adolescents to young adulthood, adult to middle age, middle age to the elderly (Paat, 2013). Foster children often suffer from generational poverty and other transitional barriers that make reclaiming autonomy difficult as they move toward adulthood (Paat, 2013). The improvement of outcomes for foster children transitioning to adulthood and independence requires social work education to prepare students for working with this specific population (Paat, 2013).

Success for foster youth who age out is largely dependent on the individual and his or her resilience and drive to become a self-sufficient member of society (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). While in foster care, foster children are “five times more likely to be diagnosed with depression, four times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and ten times

more likely to be diagnosed with bipolar disorder than other children” (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014, p. 1). These additional emotional and behavioral conditions contribute to difficulties for foster youth in their particular situations (Koehler, 2014). The negative impact is evident for communities as well, such as the following: foster youth often report involvement with drug use, fail to maintain employment, have been terminated from employment, and have exchanged sex for money (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017). Therefore, states have an intensified responsibility and should be held to higher standards of care when establishing exit programs for foster children, as well as other aspects of care throughout their time spent as wards of the court (Koehler, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory provided a holistic approach by which to view the environment of youth in crisis, particularly for the purpose of this study, foster youth preparing for independent living (Ferguson, Cassells, MacAllister, & Evans, 2013). Residential mobility, housing, housing type, and housing quality in the microsystem of environmental factors influence children’s cognitive and socioemotional growth (Ferguson et al., 2013). Residential stability is a critical basic need for children as they grow; however, many children, not just foster children, experience multiple relocations throughout their childhood. Researchers have surmised that “behavioral, emotional, and developmental difficulties” were predictors of home placement permanency (Leonard & Gudino, 2016, p. 808).

### **Related Literature**

Youth exiting foster care often endure an abrupt entry to independent living with little to no continued support (Lee & Berrick, 2014; Salazar et al., 2016; Van Andel et al., 2014; Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). Current studies related to the age out process and transition to independent living for foster care youth, as related to the transitions of general population youth, indicated that access to a “parental safety net” (Lee & Berrick, 2014, p. 78) assisted youth to

prolong and stabilize their transitions (Salazar et al., 2016). The unfortunate truth for foster youth transitioning to independent living is that there is no parental safety net to provide continued emotional and financial support after leaving care (Hunter et al., 2014), nor is there sufficient support for maintaining physical health concerns. Physical health concerns are especially problematic for foster youth who have been diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD), bipolar disorder, oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or other emotional disorders that require medication or counseling (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Foster youth who have aged out tend to forgo regular doctor appointments, discontinue medications or take their medications sporadically, and fail to keep therapeutic counseling appointments (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017), even though the Affordable Care Act mandates former foster youth are eligible to continue and receive Medicaid benefits up to their 26th birthday (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

It is reasonable to infer youth may feel that if no one cares enough about them to encourage them to continue to manage health concerns through medical treatments, they find no reason to care for themselves (Cohen, Lacasse, Duan, & Sengelmann, 2013; Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). Advocating for themselves is a barrier all youth face when transitioning to adulthood; however, just making the doctor's appointment can be problematic for foster youth without an adult to guide them through the steps of initiating the call and knowing what information to provide (Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2015). There is also the issue of not having available transportation that foster youth must secure prior to planning medical appointments (Scannapieco et al., 2016). Foster youth often must find a friend to give them a ride, and although Medicaid does provide transportation to medical appointments, arrangements must be made at least 48 hours in advance. Because the lives of foster youth lack structure and

discipline, it is not likely they will take the extra steps to secure transportation through these services (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Familial support, social networks, and mentor relationships are clearly vital for foster youth who have transitioned from care (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015).

Once the foster youth have left the foster home, the opportunity for building a crucial parent-child relationship greatly diminishes (Hunter et al., 2014). Therefore, the decision to love and build a family relationship with an adoptive family must be a conscious and daily decision that is valued, nurtured, and determined to grow and function as a family unit (Scales & Scales, 2016). Statistics indicate that foster youth who are not adopted prior to their ninth birthday are more likely to age out of foster care, meaning as the child gets older, opportunities for adoption greatly decrease (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; Curry & Abrams, 2015). It has also been documented that younger children are able to develop attachment relationships with foster families quite easily, while older children do not (Van Andel et al., 2014). Without forming those vital parent-child relationships, foster youth's transition to adulthood lacks the foundation of family and social capital support (Hunter et al., 2014) that encourages success, wellbeing, self-actualization (Maslow, 1943/2013).

Quantitative data outcomes of 250 college graduate foster care alumni were compared with outcomes of college graduates from the general population (Salazar, 2013). Analyses of covariance compared means along with logistic regressions for categorical variables. The study identified correlations between the subgroups and their identified levels of satisfaction in their current financial status and level of perceived happiness (Salazar, 2013). Even though in this study, foster care alumni earnings, job security, and satisfaction were comparable to those of the general population, young adults aging out of foster care did not report having satisfactory

mental health (Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Salazar, 2013). Foster alumni determined their level of satisfactory mental health through self-reports of significantly higher number of days with negative mental health and higher rates of being unhappy within one month's time during the study (Salazar, 2013). This self-reported analysis was indicative of the lack of self-fulfilling lifestyles for foster youth alumni.

The analysis of foster parent use of various positive discipline techniques was also relevant to this study (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; Cohen et al., 2013; Dolan & Grotevant, 2014; Geenen, Powers, & Phillips, 2015; Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015; Scales & Scales, 2016). Programs that help very young foster children learn to manage their behaviors and form valuable relationships directly influence their ability to develop self-esteem and improve their transition to independent living (Greeson, Weiler, Thompson, & Taussig, 2016). Teaching basic living skills is necessary prior to aging out of the foster care system; however, young people in general need to learn how to develop, nurture, and maintain supportive relationships (Hunter et al., 2014; Van Andel et al., 2014).

Christian service to foster children is commanded in James 1:27 which says, "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world" (New King James Version). Clearly, God expects people to take on the responsibility and care for children who are lacking a responsible adult role model in their lives. In John 14:18 Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (New King James Version). Deuteronomy 14:29 says, "And the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, may come and eat and be satisfied, that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand which you do" (New King James Version). It is good in the eyes of God for His people to care for those less fortunate, especially vulnerable children

who are unable to provide care for themselves (Troughton, 2013).

Christian beliefs, values, ethics, and morality are at the core of what foster children and displaced families desperately need to fill the voids left by a dysfunctional family unit (Troughton, 2013). The Open Home Foundation (OHF) in New Zealand is a Christian-based organization that provides social services for abused, neglected, abandoned, and orphaned children (Troughton, 2013). Within the Ministry of Social Development, OHF is the largest of independent providers for children and families exceeding 10 million dollars of government contracts from independent providers (Troughton, 2013). This type of contractual agreement between the government and OHF works in New Zealand; however, it is questionable that a similar program would work for the United States. The intent of the separation of church and state was to protect the church from government control and mandates over church business (Moore, Talwar, & Bosacki, 2012). Unfortunately, the societal implications of that law have proven detrimental to Christian-based programs operating under the financial support of any governmental funding (Jeynes, 2012). It is also important to examine spiritual growth opportunities, or the lack thereof, as they apply to foster youth and their exposure to religion and the fulfilment of spiritual needs.

Mahatmya and Lohman (2012) demonstrated through longitudinal findings that civic involvement for adults was a significant piece involving factors from their childhood. Using Bronfenbrenner's theory, Mahatmya and Lohman (2012) examined how "changes in proximal family and school social capital during adolescents is expected to mediate the influence of childhood neighborhood attributes" (p. 1169). Some children are more vulnerable to multiple relocations of home and school and find multiple relocations detrimental to learning and overall wellbeing (Pears et al., 2015). Longitudinal studies on foster youth outcomes are important to

the field of research as they follow a cohort of participants through a critical developmental and transitional period. However, longitudinal studies are difficult to complete due to internal problems that develop throughout the process (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012).

As youth transition to adulthood, it is relevant to this field of research to consider how general populations of young adults compare to the transitions of foster youth who leave foster care. One problem with conducting this study was in locating participants who would agree to identify as former foster youth past high school or college. There is a stigma associated with being identified as a foster child; therefore, adult foster alumni often disassociate themselves from that identity (Salazar, 2012) unless they are currently participating in a transition program specifically designed for assisting with the age out process. Tracking the success of foster care alumni beyond college or other postgraduate programs adds valuable data to current research. Unfortunately, current privacy laws make this a near impossible task (Salazar, 2012).

### **Transition Programs**

Federally-funded independent living programs provide the perfect atmosphere for implementing such programs as mentoring, intervention, substance abuse prevention, and educational advocacy (Salazar et al., 2016). Suggestions from Salazar et al. (2016) included the development and delivery of a collaborative program designed by various community organizations such as child welfare, higher education, and youth-serving nonprofits. A coordination of resources and programs between agencies could create a hand-off for foster youth from one program to another without an interruption of services. While one program may focus on home living skills, such as budgets, savings, and bill paying (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016), the next program may concentrate on applying for employment and workplace behavior skills (Lee & Berrick, 2014). Additional services to consider should include health

maintenance, relationship building, parenting skills, and developing a sense of peace with one's future.

Social workers do not necessarily hold a master's degree in social work; therefore, social workers as a whole may be ill equipped to foresee the impending barriers that foster youth encounter during their transition to independence (Berrick & Durst, 2014). Another factor to consider is the high degree of turnover for social workers. A child in foster care for a prolonged time is most likely to be assigned multiple caseworkers. Continued emotional conflict occurs for children in foster care when people enter and exit abruptly from their lives. Mandatory trainings are provided for social workers prior to handling cases on their own; however, these scenario-training sessions do little to prepare social workers for their first child removal and placement case (Berrick & Durst, 2014). Even though social workers may know they are making the best decision for the child at a particular time and during particular circumstances, separating children from their families is never an easy task.

Fieldwork that accompanied coursework added a unique richness for students training as social workers as it provided them the opportunity to experience the importance of creating necessary individualized plans and getting to know the families and provide the best possible care to children and families (Berrick & Durst, 2014). When students experience the family as a part of their required studies they tend to view the family on a more personal level and provide "sensitive, thoughtful, empathic, and skilled professionals . . . less likely to lose sight of the human dimensions of their work" (Berrick & Durst, 2014, p. 177). A likely opinion that social workers adopt is that the situations of foster youth are relatively the same as that of any other young adult about to transition to independent living. While the premise of the transition to adulthood may be similar—to gain employment, move out, secure housing, pay bills, begin a

family, etc.—such comparisons create bias against the foster population as a whole and as an analogy for leaving foster care, creates an negative and unrealistic point-of-view at best.

Transition programs are vital to the successful move for foster youth to leave the care of the state and dependence on its resources and accept responsibility for their own well-being and success. One method for encouraging youth to participate in collaborative efforts is through media literacy and video production (Friesem, 2014). This method is especially challenging when working with at-risk youth, particularly due to their distrust of authority (Friesem, 2014). However, the collaborative methods of filmmaking provided youth, particularly foster youth, with a greater sense of control within the storytelling process (Friesem, 2014). While creating the storyline for their film, students in small groups collaborated the making of a short story that could portray real-life situations if they chose (Friesem, 2014). This method was very effective for the foster youth population as it provided an opportunity of control in how much of their story, if any, they chose to disclose (Friesem, 2014). The level of details shared were like putting together the puzzle of their lives and they could decide if their story would create laughter, tears, or perhaps both for their audience (Friesem, 2014).

Abused children often rely on inner speech as a coping mechanism to rationalize the uncontrollable events in their lives (Kirke-Smith, Henry, & Messer, 2016). Inner speech demonstrates progression from early childhood private speech to the next developmental level; thus, the child internalizes self-talk to understand situations and circumstances, which serves as a basis for thinking (Kirke-Smith et al., 2016). Inner speech then functions as a tool to help children self-direct and self-regulate during stressful situations (Kirke-Smith et al., 2016). Executive functioning development involves skills that include flexible goal responses to difficult situations (Kirke-Smith et al., 2016). Primary executive functioning, such as inhibitions

develop in preschool years, then more complex functions develop, such as switching (flexibility of changes in action) to responding, memory and recall, and processing (Kirke-Smith et al., 2016). By helping foster youth develop their inner speech, as well as the ability to carry out executive functions, social workers, foster families, teachers, and other important role models provide a vision for independence that soon becomes reality.

### **Behavior Modification**

The skill of modification of behaviors is crucial for foster youth to obtain prior to adulthood, especially when they do not wish to continue with childhood medications (Van Andel et al., 2014). Too often foster children are diagnosed with behavior problems and prescribed antipsychotic medications when in fact they are simply acting out of distress over events in their lives they cannot control (Cohen et al., 2013). This intervention-only models one suggested approach to the problem of overprescribing medications on foster care; however, the researchers of the CriticalThinkRx curriculum program found a significant decrease in prescribed antipsychotic medications over the seven months of the study for the group utilizing behavior modification techniques (Cohen et al., 2013). Although this study was data specific, and no participants knew they were involved in a study, researchers suggest further studies that replicate this one in a naturalistic environment to isolate specific aspects that produced the change in prescriptions to children in child welfare agencies (Cohen et al., 2013).

There is a significant gap in foster care services in relation to individual preparations for independent living. Many unique cases support the necessity for personalized transition plans prior to severing services for foster youth who age out of care. Family dysfunction is a major factor to consider when creating a personalized transitional plan for foster youth. Learned behaviors, especially bad behaviors, from biological families seem to be the most difficult for

foster youth to overcome. Homelessness due to evictions, lack of work ethics, involvement with drugs and alcohol, interactions with court systems, unwanted pregnancies, and lack of education contribute to difficulties in attempts to retrain these experiences for foster youth (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014; Gypen, Vanderfaillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Forenza & Lardier, 2017; Hudson, 2013).

Another factor to consider is the resilience of the foster youth as those students are goal-oriented, persistent, and are determined to create a better future than the past they had experienced (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017; Batsche et al., 2014; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). When success means working long hours or taking extra classes, the resilient student will rise to the occasion; however, the not-so-resilient student may just decide it is not worth the extra effort. Coaches, teachers, advisors, foster parents, and mentors should be aware of warning signs that the student may be overwhelmed and help the student make necessary adjustments that allow the student to maintain success (Hunter et al., 2014). It is also necessary to recognize foster youth who are masters of manipulation and who are determined to only participate at the level that they determine is beneficial for their situation.

Although similar college-knowledge exists between foster youth and first generation students, the unique circumstances of foster youth need to be considered when designing support programs (Batsche et al., 2014). It is an area for more focused exploration as colleges and universities continue to provide on-campus support for students (Batsche et al., 2014). The development of a strong positive relationship between foster youth and adults, structured transitions in school, peer support, and positive teacher/coach/mentor relationships increase success in higher educational endeavors for foster youth (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). In-depth interviews and case study analysis provide insights to additional variables as experienced

by foster youth (Geenen et al., 2015). Moreover, future studies should examine outcomes to determine compliance with Fostering Connections Act policies, regulations, and other benefit laws. It is vital that children in foster care who need special education services or mental health services receive appropriate assistance accessing future services, such as the necessity to apply for extended Medicaid benefits beyond their 18th birthday (Perfect et al., 2013). Future studies would benefit from longitudinal data that describe adequate placement variations between foster homes (Gypen et al., 2017). Additional studies are also necessary to understand how foster care helps or hinders children's progress and work to improve existing and future programs (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013).

Due to life's circumstances, it may become a reality for some foster youth that they will not be able to achieve postsecondary education (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). Perhaps it is simply a matter of poor timing for foster youth as they are pressured to enroll in college immediately after high school. Some foster youth are simply not in a position to be successful in college immediately after graduating high school. The missing fundamental elements of a driver's license, a dependable vehicle, and part-time or full-time employment, maintaining insurance, and other vehicle maintenance are all barriers for foster youth, and they simply cannot overcome these obstacles without guidance, financial support, and advocacy. It is easy to point out that driver's training classes are provided for all high school students, while overlooking the fact that the road and range portion of securing the license requires an insured and legally maintained vehicle that is available to the foster student. Often foster parents are not willing to put a foster child on their insurance policy, and in even more cases, foster families simply do not have an extra vehicle available for the foster youth to drive (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Acceptance and support of foster youth who are enrolled in postsecondary educational

programs, particularly community college, are the focus of the grant-funded program Great Expectations in the state of Virginia. Great Expectations provides services to foster youth in 21 Virginia community colleges with specific resources to assist their educational success. Former foster students may be eligible to receive education and training voucher (ETV) funds, which can help with housing costs, computers, books, and access to these funds has helped students complete driver's training and even purchase a vehicle. However, due to high turnover in DSS agencies, social workers are not always aware of these funds when students are in need. Advocates are needed to help communicate to potential students who are about to age out of care the value of continuing education and the resources that are available (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Students participating in the program are required to maintain a 2.0 GPA and are encouraged to complete at least one postsecondary program. The benefits of continuing education for foster youth are substantial when compared to that of youth who opt out of college (Batsche et al., 2014; Day et al., 2013; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013; Salazar, 2012, 2013).

### **Mentoring**

With a continually reported void in personal support of foster youth, the use of mentoring as a viable avenue to guide and support foster youth is becoming an increasingly important means to securing social capital for young adults who are exiting the foster care system (Duke, Farruggia, & Germa, 2017). Adult mentors become supporters of foster youth as they provide emotional as well as financial support, general advice and direction (Duke et al., 2017). Former foster youth need “structured support and well-defined mentoring to engender positive educational outcomes and career choice” (Hudson, 2013, p. 131). It is difficult for foster youth to develop the necessary ambition to embark on their dreams when they struggle to secure a roof over their heads and enough food to eat. During this time of adolescent growth, foster youth, just

as all other young people, look to prominent adults in their lives such as teachers, pastors, coaches, parents, and foster parents, etc., to help guide them through their transition to independence (Hudson, 2013). However, the instability in home life for foster youth makes it virtually impossible for them to make and sustain this type of relationship for themselves (Duke et al., 2017; Hudson, 2013).

The very nature of a child's involvement with the foster care system is volatile. When a complaint of abuse or neglect is made to the social services office, if validated, it is scheduled for an investigation and if warranted, an appearance before a judge (Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, 2018). If the judge finds there is valid evidence of abuse or neglect, the child is removed from his or her home. At this point, the child typically leaves home with whatever belongings will fit into a plastic garbage bag and enters the home of complete strangers. While it is the goal of social workers to reunite children with their parents, parents often do not make significant progress in the allotted timeframe due to the nature of the initial removal. When alcohol or drugs are involved, parents are required to submit to regular and random drug testing and complete substance abuse classes. When abuse or neglect were the reasons for removal, it may not be ruled as safe for the child to ever return home, depending on the severity of the abuse or neglect (Central Virginia Legal Aid Society, 2018). Therefore, these and other reasons contribute to children being relocated to several different foster homes without forming significant, long-lasting social networks (Duke et al., 2017; Hudson, 2013).

Abrupt relocation of children, even from an unsafe home to a safe and secure environment, generates a traumatic experience for them which is often compounded by the traumas they have already experienced (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014). Young adults exiting foster care must face the challenges of independence without family support and access to only a

relatively small social network (Hudson, 2013). Mentoring programs nurture multiple types of relationships, depending on the program's specific outcome goals (Duke et al., 2017; Hudson, 2013). The precise mentoring type most beneficial to foster youth is that provided through a natural mentor relationship. The natural mentor maintains a long-lasting and meaningful relationship with the young adult (Hudson, 2013). Although the mentor is not typically a relative of the foster child, the mentor takes on a role that guides, encourages, and sometimes provides financial support for their mentee (Hudson, 2013).

Traditional mentor programs such as The National Foster Care Coalition, Fostering Healthy Connections, and Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America provide more formal and structured adult-to-youth connections on a regular basis (Hudson, 2013). While traditional relationships are important to mentees, natural mentors for foster youth provide a vital role model by supporting them through their transitions to independence, whereas traditional programs typically focus on younger participants (Hudson, 2013). These natural relationships are not likely to end when the mentee reaches a certain age or has participated for a particular time. Long-lasting and familial-type relationships from natural mentors fill a gap for foster youth that was created through chronic and complex traumatic experiences associated with removal from their home (Beyerlein & Bloch, 2014).

Mentor programs have been instrumental in the support of children involved with the welfare system as well as children in foster care (Miller et al., 2017). The Foster Care Act of 1999 (FICA) allowed federal funds to be used in support of mentor programs for foster youth (Miller et al., 2017). Many positive results have been documented from such mentor programs with possibly the greatest impact being the positive changes in problem behaviors to more prosocial behaviors in mentored foster youth (Miller et al., 2017). Unfortunately, mentor

programs that are not carefully initiated, or that lack the appropriate structure and consistency, may only provide a short-term impact on the child and render few long-lasting effects (Miller et al., 2017). Therefore, Miller et al. (2017) suggested that future research, focused on the development of scales and instruments meant to measure the aspects and effectiveness of mentor programs, would provide valuable insights to improving and individualizing mentor programs. With these instruments to assess mentor programs, mentors, and the impact on their mentees, programs can be adjusted and improved to better serve participants as well as providers (Miller et al., 2017).

The lack of stable housing is an ongoing problem for children once they enter the foster care system. Depending on the length of time children remain in care, multiple homes and schools are inevitable because the most common placements are with nonrelatives (Ahn, Greeno, Bright, Hartzel, & Reiman, 2017; Font, 2014). The average stay for a child in foster care is just under three years and the average number of relocations a child is likely to encounter is eight or more (Neiheiser, 2015). Transient conditions for young children negatively influence forming social networks and their ability to bond with foster families as well as creating emotional and behavioral problems that add to their unpredictable situation (Neiheiser, 2015).

Children in foster care have reportedly lower academic success in school and their chances diminish as they reach high school and make efforts to obtain post-secondary education (Ahmann, 2017; Hudson, 2013; Hunter et al., 2014; Morton, 2016; Neiheiser, 2015; Pears et al., 2015). The National Foster Youth Advisory Council (NFYAC) was developed to encourage foster youth to take an active role in planning for their future (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Additionally, state and local agencies developed Youth Advisory Councils (YAC) or Youth Advisory Boards (YAB) across the United States to advise both public and private agencies that

manage care for foster youth (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). These organizations invite foster youth, ages 14 to 21, to assist in improving the facilitation of the emancipation process provided by agencies (Forenza & Happonen, 2016).

Currently all 50 states have a version of an advisory board for foster youth which has proven instrumental to effecting change within foster care systems (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Through participating in YAB, YAC, or NFYAC, foster youth build leadership qualities, learn to advocate for themselves and other foster youth, and build valuable civic networks (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). The primary focus of YABs is to provide opportunities for foster youth to interact with policymakers, giving them a voice in matters that affect their lives (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). The YABs also lobby to formulate legislation as it relates to the emancipation process for foster youth (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Due to the nature of representation the YAB provides, it is important to maintain diversity in age, race, and gender (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Foster YABs also address other issues all youth encounter such as “child obesity, bullying, disabilities, dating violence, homelessness, service-learning, and issues confronted by youth both in transitioning out of foster care” (Forenza & Happonen, 2016, p. 113).

### **Summary**

The majority of states in the United States work diligently to address the educational and transitional requirements of the amendment to Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, which ensures that youth who transition from foster care will receive access to education and training vouchers (Perfect et al., 2013). Current research on foster youth and the age out process is predominantly quantitative and provides the field of education with important but general statistics related to the academic achievement of foster youth who have aged out of care (Morton,

2016). Although these statistics have led several states to fund excellent transition programs such as Great Expectations in Virginia, the TRAC program in Texas, as well as the Christian-based OHF in New Zealand, qualitative research provides a more in-depth view of the experiences foster youth encounter as they transition from foster care to independent living (Morton, 2016). Transition programs provide foster youth with vital support as they gain their independence from foster parents and the social service network.

Programs that focus on instruction in financial literacy, workplace skills, and relationship building as well as other support services for foster youth in higher education equip students with successful tools that enhance stability and promote success for their future. The limited qualitative studies, particularly phenomenological studies that focus on what foster youth experience during the age out process, dismiss the valuable holistic view for educators and community stakeholders to consider as they continue to develop successful assistance programs. A better understanding of the age out process from the viewpoint of the foster youth who have experienced the phenomenon adds value to qualitative literature and further develops the quality of information available relative to areas that are more specific to the age out process.

Programs that are designed to assist foster youth through the transition to independent living and/or higher education attainment provided positive outcomes for participants when compared to non-participating foster youth (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Positive experiences through these transition programs also rely on meaningful working relationships between the foster youth and the providers (Morrison, 2016). Transition programs, especially grant-funded programs, continually face the possibility the funder will withdraw funding for a new venture. Therefore, it is vital for the foster youth promotional transition programs to keep the success stories of their participants at the forefront of program promotions. Funders are less

likely to pull away from programs that are visibly making a positive impact on the lives of participants.

Intervention models are only effective if all parties buy in to the process of making necessary changes to correct unacceptable behaviors. Behavior is a significant indicator of successful independent transitions for foster youth who are about to age out of care (Van Andel et al., 2014). Learned behaviors are especially difficult to alter, even when the child is trying to behave acceptably. Homelessness, poor work ethics, addictions to drugs and/or alcohol, criminal court involvement, and unwanted pregnancies all contribute to negative outcomes for foster youth (Forenza & Happonen, 2016; Forenza & Lardier, 2017). Resilience, however, is also evident in foster youth and is an indicator of positive transitions from care to independence (Morrison, 2016). Resilience is a trait that helps foster youth maintain certain protective factors that build on self-esteem, initiative, trust, positive attachments, security, and ultimately autonomy (Morrison, 2016).

Valuable relationships are key instruments for nurturing resilient behaviors in foster youth. Because so many adults in their lives have disappointed the children in foster care, it is often difficult for them to trust other adults, especially adults who have authority over them (Friesem, 2014). Therefore, mentoring programs have been especially successful in reaching foster youth and engaging them with instruction in life skills for independent living (Morrison, 2016). Just as any great mentor will listen to the needs of the mentee, childcare agencies must listen to the voices of children in foster care. The mission of a YAB or YAC is to include foster youth and foster youth alumni and carefully consider their suggestions and input as the recipients of provided services (Forenza & Happonen, 2016). Still, rendering appropriate and adequate care to children in need of services will depend largely on the servicing agency. It is imperative

that agencies consider the holistic needs of each individual child and formulate services that provide the best overall care for the child.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

### Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of foster youth who aged out or were about to age out of foster care in rural southern areas of Virginia. Participants were selected from foster youth who were currently, or had been, members of the Great Expectations program at community colleges in Virginia. The sites for this study included five community colleges in south side and southwest Virginia in an effort to reach the minimum of 12 to 15 qualifying participants. The Great Expectations' coaches in surrounding counties provided the initial contact with students to create a purposeful, snowball sampling. While race and gender can be indicators for postsecondary educational success (Batsche et al., 2014; Day et al., 2013; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013; Salazar, 2012, 2013; Salazar et al., 2016), they were not factors considered for the selection of participants for this study.

To age out was generally defined as foster youth who have reached the age of 18, are emancipated from the foster care system, and have or are about to transition to independent living status. This chapter describes the qualitative design for this study as it utilized transcendental phenomenological methods of "intersubjective reality" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 59) to examine participants' unique experiences of aging out of foster care. While foster youth who age out of foster care indeed experience the same transition, not all of their experiences are the same. This method of phenomenological study allowed participants to step through their experiences and express their perception of the process. The researcher's personal involvement with the foster care system was bracketed out of the findings as outlined by this method of study to prevent or at least minimize researcher bias. Emerging themes from interviews, focus groups, and activities were combined and evaluated to identify the essence of the age out process for the

participants.

Additionally this chapter introduces the central research question: What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college? This question was expanded through three sub research questions with the intent to add depth in understanding of the experiences of aging out of foster care and enrolling in a postsecondary program. The sub questions are presented individually later in this chapter along with supporting literature. This chapter details the procedures for conducting the study, the researcher's role in the field of foster care and education, data collection methods, interview questions for individuals and focus groups, document analysis of captions participants provided for picture cards, as well as any supporting data or documentation used with the written permission of participants.

This chapter includes evidence of trustworthiness, credibility, dependability, and confirmability within the design, methods, and implementation of this study. The value of a qualitative study is not in the transferability of its findings from one group of participants to another. However, this particular study presented findings that are applicable to other rural regions of this country and those possibilities were discussed. Ethical considerations in the handling of data and confidentiality of the participants were also a priority for this study and described through detailed management procedures. This chapter concludes with a summary of the design, participants, data collection procedures, validity, and ethical considerations for this study.

### **Design**

The foundation of qualitative research is in the assumption that individuals use meanings and interpretations to describe social reality (Gall et al., 2007). Conducting qualitative research

involves dedication to the demands of time and resources to explore in its entirety the problem at the focus of the study (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology explores a single concept or idea with a group of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). A transcendental phenomenological approach focuses on knowledge as it appears to consciousness, describes the experiences through sensory recollection, and provides a description of the phenomenon through science and philosophy as it unfolds (Moustakas, 1994).

A qualitative approach was the appropriate design for this study as it allowed the researcher to adopt broad assumptions as an interpretative lens for a problem that exists for today's foster youth (Creswell, 2013). A transcendental phenomenological study looks at what exists in reality, as it is relevant to the conscious awareness of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). By encouraging participants to describe their experiences openly, a phenomenological study allowed the researcher to understand some of the core emotions experienced through the age out process for foster youth (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). A transcendental phenomenology also allowed the researcher to explore the intentionality, noema, and noesis (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology research design was selected to gain a deeper understanding of the age out phenomenon as experienced by foster youth. This study was not only focused on the emotional and social impact of the age out process, but also intended to investigate participants' ideas related to their experiences (*noema*), and the resulting ideals that occurred from that process (*noesis*). As applied to this study, Husserl's idea of the *noema* is the feelings, reflection, recollection, and judgments that foster youth developed toward the DSS agency, their foster parents, their biological family members, and society as a whole. Husserl's *noesis* is relative to the state of mind created in youth who experienced foster care and the

embedded meanings that were hidden from their consciousness. Understanding the *noema* of the age out process according to foster youth provided valuable insights to the *noesis* that was developed through their experiences.

The early work of Husserl emphasized the importance of “bracketing” the researcher’s “natural attitude” or to “set aside” assumptions of daily living derived from sciences (Schwandt, 2015, p. 22). As the progression of discovery adds to the humanistic field of study by leading researchers in different directions from the ordinary assumptions relative to human studies (Moustakas, 1994), it is vital to the integrity of the study to limit personal perceptions and prior knowledge (Schwandt, 2015) as influenced by prior knowledge of the foster care system. The process of discovery was the basis of this study as it provided an opportunity for educators to consider the transition from high school to postsecondary education programs for foster youth as they exit the foster care system. This informational viewpoint may lead to programs that reduce some barriers and encourage at-risk populations to pursue higher education goals.

### **Research Questions**

Central Research Question: What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college?

SQ 1: How do participants describe the influence of the age out process on their life decisions?

SQ 2: What is the participants’ perceived role of the state in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?

SQ 3: How do participants describe the role of foster parents, guardians, and kinship caregivers in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?

## Sites

Twenty-one of the 23 community colleges in Virginia currently participate in the Great Expectations student support program which is funded by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education, the Commonwealth of Virginia, and other partners, for the specific benefit of supporting foster youth in higher education (Great Expectations, 2017). South side and western Virginia are rural communities with documented fewer opportunities for employment as evident from unemployment statistics. Currently in one south side county, the unemployment rate is 10% for residents over age 16 and 39.1% for residents age 16 to 19 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). The unemployment rate in the same community drops for young adults' age 20 to 24, to 20.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Without the proper encouragement, foster youth do not consider higher education as an option to improve employment opportunities due to their struggle to find an adequate source of income (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013).

Participants were selected based on their location in the “rural horseshoe” of Virginia. The “horseshoe” is identified as rural areas of Virginia beginning at the northern peak and extending down the western region, then curving across the southern counties stopping just before reaching the east coast counties (CSCI, 2017). If this described region were a separate state, it would rank last in high school graduates (CSCI, 2017). If the counties beginning at the northern peak of Virginia and extending along the eastern coast, referred to as the “urban crescent” were a separate state, 90% of their residents would graduate from high school (CSCI, 2017). These graduation statistics for Virginia, along with the aforementioned unemployment rates, added to the evidence of the need for additional qualitative studies with this population of students.

Rural community colleges provided the population of participants to complete this study.

Community college presidents are accommodating to doctoral candidates and their proposed studies that may add to the literature related to educational concerns for students in their communities. The Great Expectations coaches at five of the 21 community colleges assisted with securing qualified participants. The following pseudonyms were assigned: community college one (1) was referred to as CC1; community college two (2) was referred to as CC2; Great Expectations coaches were referred to respectively as GE-1 and GE-2. Additional community colleges were added to the study to secure the desired number of participants, pseudonyms for the institution and coaches were identified accordingly. Participants were also assigned appropriate gender related pseudonyms beginning with the letter A, then B, and so forth. The identity of colleges and participants are kept in a password secured file, stored in a locked office, and were not used in any published documents. Only the primary researcher has access to the secured files.

### **Participants**

This study utilized a purposeful snowball sampling that identified participants of interest through others who have prior knowledge of the relationship individuals had with the phenomenon to be studied (Creswell, 2013): aging out of foster care. Great Expectations coaches, educators, social workers, and possibly participants who have knowledge of other foster youth or siblings who meet the criteria for this proposed study also referred participants. Participants in this study included adults between the ages of 18 and 26 who aged out or were about to age out of foster care. There was no criteria related to gender, race, or socioeconomic status for this study; however, demographic information was provided through self-reporting from the participants and was partially included in the findings.

The initial request began at the community colleges in southern and south-central

Virginia with the Great Expectations coaches. The coaches contacted their current and former students through face-to-face requests, email, and phone calls to gauge interest. Students who did not wish to participate were permitted to refer friends in the foster care system. The researcher also requested referrals from foster parents, foster siblings, social workers, etc., until the minimum required sample size was reached. All interested prospective participants were contacted by phone, email, or in person to assess the participants' eligibility based on the aforementioned criteria.

After ensuring willing participants met the qualifications, a minimum of 12 participants were secured for the study. A minimum number of participants satisfied the requirement of saturation for this study (Creswell, 2013). The minimum number of participants was not as relevant to this study as the collection of data that enhanced the understanding of ideas and ideals of young adults who exited the foster care system. As an added incentive, each participant received a \$25.00 gift card for fully participating in the data gathering requirements for the study. The primary data gathering requirements included at least one personal interview and participation in at least one of the two focus groups. Other collaboration for verification and understanding (e.g. member checks) were necessary and conducted through email, telephone, or in person. As with all data gathering instruments, all information and personal interviews are kept confidential; likewise, any recordings and transcripts are stored in a secure, password-protected location and will remain secure until the appropriate time for all records to be destroyed.

### **Procedures**

The research proposal was submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval. Subsequently, a request was made of community college one (CC1) and

community college two (CC2) for their IRB approvals. Once IRB approval from each site and Liberty University was received (see Appendix A), a pilot study was conducted at the researcher's home college to provide practice for the interview and focus group process. As all data from the pilot study were for practice, no information was recorded or stored after the interview or focus group sessions. The main purpose of the pilot was to provide practice with bracketing out preconceived bias as related to students' situations. The snowball sampling process began with initial calls to GE coaches at CC1 and CC2 to create interest among students. Advertising flyers were sent to the GE coaches at the respective colleges to post in areas where they commonly greet students. The initial contact with potential participants established their interest and eligibility. The researcher provided several possible dates to conduct personal interviews, secured a location to conduct the interviews, and scheduled participants. The researcher provided a minimum of three possible dates for conducting focus groups and participants signed up for the date that best fit their schedules. Due to the need for additional participants, CC3, CC4, and CC5 were contacted and approved by the institutions' IRB board or college president to inquire interest from their current and former students. This expansion provided the minimum number of participants required to complete this study.

Prior to conducting interviews or focus groups, participants signed a consent form, which was retained and secured by the researcher (see Appendix B). Interviews were audio recorded by at least two recording devices. The recording devices were password protected and transported in a locked vehicle at all times. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim by professional transcriptionists and/or the researcher and then reviewed for emerging themes (see Appendix E for an example of transcription). The transcriptionists only received a number and pseudonym to identify the participant, which were assigned in the order the interviews were

conducted. The researcher was, and remains, the only person with access to the identities of the assigned pseudo names and numbers and the key is stored in an encrypted computer file that is password protected. The focus groups, which were also recorded, were transcribed in the same manner with the first speaker assigned the same pseudonym for participation in the focus group and identified as such for the transcriptionist.

The emerging themes were coded for analysis utilizing a story line for the age out process. Participants' experiences of their age out transitions built the story line for coding (Creswell, 2013). Picture assessments during the initial interview were used to evaluate participants' expectations for life goals. Participants were asked to skim through various picture cards and write a caption for the picture that spoke something to them. After completing the first six interviews, the first focus group was scheduled, likewise for the second focus group. Participants were given equal opportunities to be heard through the two separate focus groups, which were limited to four or six participants for each session. The researcher moderated the focus group and ensured each member had appropriate opportunities to share. Focus group sessions were also audio recorded and professionally transcribed for review.

### **The Researcher's Role**

As an advocate for foster youth who are transitioning from foster care to independent living and community college enrollment, the researcher had both a professional and emotional investment in this particular topic of study. Daily work with students, both former and current foster youth, revealed that not only were they not prepared for college but they were also not prepared for the responsibilities of independent living. Former foster youth as students have no family support once they transition from their foster care homes. Although there are monetary resources for education and training, foster youth are often unaware of these resources and not

able to advocate for themselves to access funds. As a GE coach, this researcher sees firsthand the struggles of foster youth who are trying to continue with their educational goals. Due to researcher's involvement with the foster care system and current work with the population of students who were the focus of this study, the potential was high for possible bias-related analysis of their experiences. For this reason, the researcher took two significant precautions. The first precaution was in the selection of the transcendental method utilizing bracketing to limit bias in phenomenological studies. The second precaution was that participants were not recruited from any students at the researcher's institution, or students known to the researcher who transferred to any of the five participating sites. Furthermore, participants were not recruited from any former clients of the researcher while employed as a child protective service investigator, nor any child that was ever in the researcher's care while serving as a foster parent.

It was the researcher's hope to open a dialogue with each participant that allowed them to speak to their experiences in a safe and comfortable environment. Therefore, participants were respectfully allowed to refuse to answer any question that made them feel uncomfortable. As the number of children in foster care increases each year, the statistics surrounding their chances of gainful employment without postsecondary training and education are increasingly minimized (Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2015). Many youth exiting foster care often return to their biological families and the same abusive or neglectful situation from which they were removed (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Scannapieco et al., 2016). It is this researcher's firm belief that education is the significant component that leads to breaking the cycle of generational poverty, which is an assumed legacy for children aging out of foster care through the learned dependent lifestyle of their parents. Education is also the appropriate avenue for teaching youth to become

self-sufficient through the development of methods and skills that liberate them from dependence on governmental and community resources.

### **Data Collection**

Conducting focus groups allowed participants to speak openly to the age out process and discuss any suggestions they would make related to local agencies, foster parents, or even to legislators. A private interview room was reserved at locations for three interviews conducted in person. Due to the inclusion of three additional schools, the remaining interviews were conducted by phone as were both focus groups. A minimum of two recording devices was used after participants signed the release form. Interviews were professionally transcribed and then stored in a locked and secure location for future review and analysis. Participants were asked to view 15 picture cards and write a caption or phrase for the picture. The captions were used to start a social conversation, not only as an icebreaker, but also to create a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, one in which the participants felt comfortable to reflect on their past experiences (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Interviews**

Participants were asked 13 or more open-ended questions to develop a dialogue of their age out experience; however, due to interviews of this nature being interactive, the sessions were not rigidly scripted and did not always adhere to the pre-determined questions, even the open-ended ones (Moustakas, 1994). Additional questions were necessary to deepen the context of the interview and pursue the philosophical assumption of methodology (Creswell, 2013). Face-to-face interviews provide the opportunity for the researcher to observe social cues that enhance understanding, particularly of the participants' described experiences (Opdenakker, 2006). During the interview and focus group sessions, the researcher observed the participants for

additional cues that emerged (see Appendix D for focus group questions). While phone interviews for this study eliminated visual cues on body language and facial expressions, noted hesitations in voice and responses provided valuable insights to the participants' experiences and understanding. The emergent stories that are the result of the participants' authentic lived experiences, including emotions and feelings, provide in-depth data that are the product of the relationship between the researcher and the participants (Schwandt, 2015). The interview portion of the study was unstructured (Schwandt, 2015); however, to keep the conversation on task and flowing, the following questions were used as a guide to help participants focus:

#### Interview Questions

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. Because I need a better understanding of your foster care experience, tell me about a typical day with your most recent foster family. Feel free to only share what you are comfortable sharing.
3. Tell me about your history with the foster care system.
4. What was your level of understanding of what it would be like living on your own prior to leaving foster care?
5. Tell me about what you were feeling just before you prepared to move from your final foster home.
6. What were your typical interactions like with your social worker or caseworker just before you turned 18?
7. How did these interactions compare with earlier visits or interactions?

8. Tell me about your preparation for independent living from your viewpoint. What did you think you would need to do to prepare yourself for independent living?
9. Tell me about the preparations for your independent living process by your foster family. How did your foster parents participate in this process?
10. Describe your first thoughts once you were on your own and no longer in your foster home.
11. Ideally, part of becoming an adult involves the process of examining and evaluating one's worldview (how you describe the world in which you live). Where are you in that process?
12. In what ways did the agency support you throughout the age out process?
13. Consider for a moment the best possible age out process. What would you suggest that could improve the transition to independent living for foster youth still living in care?

Questions 1–4 provided basic knowledge inquiries to develop a better understanding of the participants' ideas related to their foster families and social workers. Questions 5–6 asked for the participants' viewpoint of the preparation process and what was believed about becoming independent. Questions 7–8 focused on the actual transition period and the participants' ideals related to independent living. Questions 9–10 asked the participants to think about the agency's policies, procedures, and preparation for aging out and asked for suggestions they felt would contribute to a smoother transition for other foster youth.

### **Document Analysis**

The participants were shown a variety of picture cards and asked to describe why they chose a particular card and how they most identified with the card by writing a caption. Some card choices depicted a positive, family-type portrait, while others were viewed as having a less

than positive appeal or were more general in nature. Participants were asked to email their captions and some preferred to openly discuss their impressions with the researcher during the interview. These participant descriptions were analyzed along with the transcripts from interviews and focus groups. Visual research methods, such as the picture card descriptions, brought stimulus to the narrative process that evoked recollections and helped the researcher to understand certain mannerisms and perceptions (Schwandt, 2015).

### **Focus Groups**

A focus group allows a moderator to prepare a safe and open environment for participants to share their experiences of the phenomenon (Gall et al., 2007). The moderator, a skilled interviewer, allows each group member to speak freely and openly and share their experiences (Gall et al., 2007). For the purpose of this study, two focus groups were conducted to engage participants and share the phenomenon with their peers. Focus groups allow participants to feel like their voices are being heard; they collaborate with each other, and each member is on a level field with equal status (Gall et al., 2007). Participants were granted an opportunity to share; however, the moderator gently encouraged the flow of conversation from one participant to the next to prevent domination of the conversation by any one member. As with the interview sessions, at least two recording devices were used for transcription purposes.

### **Focus Group Questions**

1. Introduce yourself to the group, using only first names (participants were reminded of their assigned pseudonyms prior to the focus group and asked to only use that name during the group session). Tell us how long you were in foster care and how long you have been living on your own.
2. Now, take a moment to reflect on your last year in foster care, from the time you turned 17,

to just before your 18th birthday. Describe your dreams of independence and living on your own.

3. Think about when you were preparing to leave your final foster home placement for the last time. What thoughts were going through your mind concerning your immediate future?
4. Imagine that you are finished school and working full-time at a job that you like. If you are finished with school and working full-time, imagine that you just received a promotion on your job and you are feeling good about yourself. What would your life need at this point to make you truly happy?
5. If you could change anything about your age out process, what would it be and why?
6. What advice do you have for the 17-year-old version of you that we were talking about at the beginning of the group?

### **Data Analysis**

The epoche is defined as refraining from judgments that fit in the ordinary assumptions with a purposeful determination to view something from a different perspective and reach a transcendental view that is not cluttered by presuppositions (Moustakas, 1994). Once the first interview was transcribed, the data analysis process began. Each interview and focus group statement was analyzed solely on the topic, central research question, and sub questions, horizontalizing every statement as it provided value to the results (Moustakas, 1994). Overlapping, irrelevant, and repetitive themes were removed, leaving only textural statements that focused on the age out phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The data collected were continually analyzed and revised through the process of reduction and elimination to test for both (a) an expression that was necessary and (b) if the experience could be labeled as a constituent of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Core themes of the experience were clustered and labeled as

such, and the themes were checked against the records for validation (Moustakas, 1994). Each member of the dissertation committee was provided access to the individual textural and structural descriptions of the data (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were stored in a locked office on a password-protected computer or other storage device.

The method of bracketing was used in this study as a means of laying aside preconceived understanding of the social service foster care system to simply reflect in the findings the expressed lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013). Grouping was also used to organize reoccurring themes into categories or horizons for analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions were analyzed in word-for-word accounts of participants' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A structural description of the phenomenon provided a chronological account as recalled by the participants (Moustakas, 1994). The conclusion, or a composite of each participant's experience, provided the essence of the phenomenon from each uniquely lived viewpoint (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is evaluated on the essence of meaningful engagement of the participants' experiences provide for stakeholders (Schwandt, 2015). This study demonstrated credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as the criteria described in the following sections to ensure trustworthiness. This study engaged participants who had experienced the age out process from foster care as the shared phenomenon. An assessment of reflective dialogue was used to describe and evaluate interviews and focus group interactions (Gall et al., 2007), as well as the assessment of pictograms used in the initial interviews. Because each DSS agency is afforded latitude in the operations of their agencies, the

findings reflected both differences as well as similarities (Gall et al., 2007) to provide the best overall operational guidelines as they relate to the age out process.

### **Credibility**

The “idea is well grounded” (Creswell, 2013, p. 259) that aging out of foster care presents an ongoing problem for foster youth and it is a valid concern and genuine topic of interest for the field of education. Therefore, this study provided credible research that added valuable qualitative data to current research. The researcher conducted member checks as a follow up to each interview session through phone calls or email to verify the perception of understanding from the participants’ point of view to the researcher’s interpretation (Schwandt, 2015). This respondent validation technique allowed the researcher to confirm the meaning behind participants’ contributions to the study (Schwandt, 2015).

The added provision for participants to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason without penalty assured their safety in the process. Furthermore, participants were not required to discuss any topics that made them uncomfortable or that they felt were too personal (Patton, 2015). Participants would not encounter any negative repercussions for ending their participation prior to the conclusion of the study. The researcher was not able to confirm an initial interview appointment with one participant; therefore, another participant was selected to complete the study. The incentive (\$25 stipend), was only provided to those who completed the entire study and were available after the interview or focus group to either clarify or verify any facts.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

The process for this study demonstrated a rational, visible, and well-documented method of qualitative research (Schwandt, 2015). Three transcriptionists, including the researcher, were

secured to assist with interview and focus group transcriptions. All hard copies of documents are kept in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's personal locked office. When transferring documents to work from remote locations, any vehicle used was also kept locked for security. All computer and recording documents and devices are kept locked and password protected (Patton, 2015). These steps demonstrated the dependability of the study.

Coding used in this study linked specific assertions, findings, and interpretations to discern the data for analysis (Patton, 2015). The entire research committee, to ensure a complete and thorough examination of the data, reviewed emerging themes. The researcher used caution when interpreting the data to ensure findings were reported accurately rather than according to the researcher's prior opinions of foster youth, social workers, DSS agencies, or the age out process as a whole (Schwandt, 2015). The data were presented in the findings of this study in a discernable manner for the ease of interpretation for stakeholders as well as others interested in the age out process according to those who have experienced the process (Schwandt, 2015). The methods used to interview and record participants and the procedures used to analyze the data ensured the confirmability of these results.

### **Transferability**

The constructs of this study were transferable to other regions and states in the United States as all localities are mandated to comply with federal guidelines related to the age out process for foster youth (Perfect et al., 2013). Multiple studies conducted in various regions and populations add transferability to this phenomenological study (Patton, 2015). The one element that differs for regions outside of Virginia is the absence of the Great Expectations program in community colleges. While other localities may not have a GE program, there are other state programs, local funds, and additional resources available to assist foster youth in higher

education; therefore, it is not likely the absence of the GE program would prevent transferability of this study to any other region within the United States.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study followed the Institutional Review Board guidelines at Liberty University, as well as those of the five community colleges from which the sample of participants was recruited. While I currently work with foster youth at a community college, I excluded any of my students from this study. Bracketing was necessary during the interview sessions, as well as in the analysis portion of the study, to prevent prior knowledge with students' cases and previous employment with DSS to infringe on the perspectives of the participants. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants and sites. Precise care was taken to protect all written, recorded, and pictorial documents by utilizing passwords and locked storage locations. Any potential participant previously known to the researcher (either as a GE coach, while with DSS, or as a foster parent), was not recruited or included in the study.

While employed by the department of social services, the researcher inevitably developed preconceived ideas, both in favor of and against methods used by the agency to address the age out process for foster youth. That employment experience also provided insight into the importance of protecting the participant's stories and the value of accurate documentation of events. The proper release signatures of participants was secured prior to accessing school records. The participants' stories were interpreted according to the researcher's best ability of discernment, and the findings were not clouded by preconceived disposition of DSS agencies or the age out process. After the completion and publication of the study, all research-related data will be stored securely for three years, after which time all data will be destroyed.

## Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study was designed to examine and document the experiences of foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system. The purpose was to give a voice to foster youth in rural south side Virginia who experienced the age out process with a focus on specific independent living skills they gained from their foster parents, guardians, group homes, or DSS agencies. A snowball sampling of participants between ages 18 and 26 presented the ideal sample and provided vivid recollections of their age out experiences.

The intention of creating pictograms during the initial interview session was to assist the participants to become at ease and feel comfortable sharing their aging out experiences. As a GE coach, the researcher works daily with foster youth on a community college campus. It is apparent that foster youth face many barriers including limited emotional, social, and financial support, which they often have difficulty expressing. After initial interviews, the focus groups encouraged participants to share their experiences with others who have experienced the same phenomenon. Support often comes from the realization that others have experienced similar troubles and learning comes from sharing those feelings with others. The collected data from pictograms, interviews, and focus groups were analyzed and reported while carefully protecting the identity of participating schools, GE coaches, and individual participants. The deep, thick, rich data gathered and analyzed from this study contributed valuable insights to the current literature and provided additional insight into the age out process for communities and education stakeholders.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to describe the age out experiences of current or former foster youth who enrolled, or planned to enroll, in higher education programs. Twelve participants, ages 18 to 26, from five community college regions were recruited to participate. The participants' responses during interviews and focus groups were recorded, transcribed, interpreted, and analyzed by the researcher. Each research question was asked of each participant; however, during the individual interviews more probing questions were asked in order to reveal adequate details of their experiences. The findings were provided through the analysis of interview responses, focus group collaborations, picture cards, and demographic information provided by participating colleges. Focus groups summaries, along with quotes from participants in the group sessions, were included in the results analysis.

Chapter Four contains the results of the findings and data analysis of this study on aging out of foster care in Virginia as experienced by these 12 participants. Each of the 12 participants responded to all 13 interview questions and eight of the 12 also participated in two focus groups. This chapter introduces the participants beginning with their demographic information, which was not an exclusive factor for inclusion in this study. Participants' quotes, relative to their age out and foster care experience, were provided followed by responses to the interview questions.

The results of the study follow the participant information and focus group summary and include a detailed account of the steps used for data analysis. The analysis of sub questions is reported next followed by three emerging themes. Details of the two focus groups and their contribution to the data follow the emerging themes. Chapter Four concludes with a summary of the data analysis.

## Participants

The 12 participants for this qualitative study were located in southern and southwestern rural Virginia and included five male and seven female participants with four being Caucasian, seven African-American, and one Hispanic-American. The participants were both foster care alumni and current members of foster care between the ages of 18 and 26. The Great Expectations program coaches at five community colleges assisted with recruiting participants from their current and graduated student rosters. The following table indicates the demographics of the participant sample:

Table 1

### *Participant Overview*

Participant	Race	Gender	Time in Foster Care
Anna	African-American	Female	10 years
Bailey	Caucasian	Female	2 years
Caden	African-American	Male	3 to 4 years
Dakota	African-American	Female	18 years
Eden	African-American	Female	6 years
Faith	Caucasian	Female	4 years
Gabe	African-American	Male	4 years
Ida	Hispanic-American	Female	15 years
Jack	African-American	Male	3 years
Kevin	African-American	Male	10+ years
Madison	Caucasian	Female	5 years
Nate	Caucasian	Male	5 to 6 years

The phenomenon shared by this group of participants was based on the presumption that each had experienced or were preparing to experience aging out of foster care. Each participant was

assigned a pseudonym prior to the initial interview. While some interviews were conducted in a face-to-face format, the majority were conducted by phone and both focus groups were conducted through two separately scheduled conference calls. All interviews and focus groups were recorded using two recording devices. Recordings were transferred to a password-protected computer housed in a locked and secured office. After transcriptions were complete, recording devices were cleared of interview and focus group recordings. Participants were given the opportunity to review their recorded interviews in order to minimize misunderstandings during the analysis process (Creswell, 2013).

Participants were instructed to refer to themselves only by their assigned names during all recorded sessions. Brief introductions to each of the participants, and their unique encounters with the foster care system, provided a rich understanding of their age out process and learning development.

### **Anna**

The beginning of the interview questions asked for a brief introduction of the participant and a description of his or her typical day in foster care. Anna, an African-American female, 19 years old, entered the foster care system at age 9. Anna said her mother had a serious drug addiction and could no longer provide for Anna, so she entered the foster care system. Anna stayed in many different foster homes, some with little babies; some homes had older girls with whom she was not compatible. Anna did not recall how many foster families with which she had been involved. Anna said she was actually adopted at age 17, but the adoptive family, one of her former foster families, did not work out. Anna re-entered the foster care system until she signed herself out at age 18.

Anna said a typical day in foster care included, “counseling, take meds . . . we got to go see the psychiatrist, hum, we had to attend school, so, just basically ripping and running all day.” Anna disclosed that she feels her mother’s drug addiction has led to the anxiety and other mental issues she deals with daily. Those issues have made it very difficult for Anna to reach her educational goals. Anna has attempted to test for her GED on numerous occasions; however, she has yet to be successful, and on two occasions, Anna missed the math portion by only one point.

### **Bailey**

Bailey, a Caucasian female currently age 26, entered foster care in her late teens and was in the system until she aged out of care through an independent living program. Bailey was only in two different foster homes, as she did not enter care until she was 16 years old. She was removed from her first foster home due to medical neglect. Although she did not elaborate on the details of the neglect, she did mention she loved that home. However, the second home she described as “a living hell.” Bailey described a typical day with her last foster family as one of isolation and seclusion. Bailey said, “I never came out of my room; always stayed in my room. I never came out of my room, unless I was taking a shower or I was fixing something to eat, but other than that, I stayed in my room.” Bailey transitioned to independent living after turning 18 and received assistance through a private foster care agency. Her caseworker assisted with job search, housing placement, transportation needs, furnishings for her apartment, and financial assistance to supplement part-time employment while finishing school. Bailey said she had been isolated for so long that when she was on her own she “was buck-wild” and she said, “I barely didn’t even graduate.” Bailey had planned to take classes at a community college, but had not yet determined a field of study. She said she wanted to provide a better life for her two children

than what she had. Even though she is now working full time, her current job will never provide the means to a standard of living that she needs to improve her lifestyle.

### **Caden**

Caden was an African-American male, age 20, who was in two different group homes from age 15 to age 18. A typical day in the group home “would be like going to the gym, or just sitting around, playing games.” Caden adapted well to the group homes and spoke positively of his experiences with both homes. He was enrolled in general studies college courses’ however, due to moving back with his biological mother at age 18, he had to leave school to secure a full time employment position. He stated that he just want to help his mom and make life easier for her. Caden said he had not given up on school; however, until he could complete driver’s training course and get his license, school would have to wait. He planned to work and save some money, get his driver’s license and return to school, even if only part time.

### **Dakota**

Dakota was an African-American female, age 19, who entered foster care at birth. She was in several different foster homes, some family friends, then back to foster care outside the state of Virginia. Dakota said when she was born her mother was on drugs and would pass her off to anyone willing to keep her. She even said her mother sold her for drugs at times until she was completely taken away and placed in foster care. Dakota was eventually placed in a foster home in south central Virginia, which was the home from which she aged out. Dakota said a typical day in her last foster home involved “a lot of yelling; foster dad yelled a lot. He was a angry person.” Dakota left that foster home and moved in with her biological grandparents. After her grandmother passed away, Dakota remained in the home to provide care for her grandfather.

Dakota is a young single parent of a baby girl that she loves very much. Dakota said education is very important to her because she wants to provide a good life for herself and her daughter. She said she knows how difficult it would be if she were on her own with her baby. She said she was sure she would not be able to continue with school because she would most likely need two jobs to make ends meet; therefore, she was grateful to be able to live with her grandfather. While providing care for her grandfather and her daughter, she could work part time and continue with school full time.

### **Eden**

Eden was an African-American female, age 19, and in foster care from age 12 until she signed herself out at age 18. Although Eden would have greatly benefitted from staying in foster care and transitioning from the group home to independent living, she chose to return to live with her biological mother. Without elaborating on the reason for removal from her home and placement in foster care, Eden obviously experienced a very tumultuous living environment based on the background cursing and yelling during the interview and focus group. Eden said she knew it would be hard living on her own because everything was taken care of for her at the home. She said she knew it would be easier if she went back home, too, because she would have her mother to help her. Eden said she has three brothers, two nephews and a niece, and did not indicate if any of her siblings also reside with her mother. During the course of this study, Eden and her family moved twice.

A typical day for Eden in foster care involved “going to the beach, we was in Brunswick but we always went to Norfolk.” Eden said she was the only child in that foster home and she enjoyed that family placement. Eden said she had never tried living on her own, as she moved straight from the group home to her mother’s home after signing herself out of care. She said

she knew living on her own would be hard, and she just missed her mom and wanted to be back living with her. Eden had been enrolled in community college but was forced to take a semester off due to financial aid suspension; she plans to return when her hold has been lifted.

### **Faith**

Faith was a Caucasian female, age 22, who first entered foster care at age 14. Faith was placed in two different group homes, but eventually aged out of care from a foster family home. A typical day for her was as follows: “It was a pretty normal, everybody was pretty normal, I would go to school, I would come home, really like a regular family within that home.” She said the family consisted of a foster mother and one biological daughter who was in her early thirties. Faith said she came home from school one day and was told “out of the blue” that she had to leave. She said she did receive some financial assistance from social services. Faith and her boyfriend, who became her husband, moved into a small apartment together. DSS provided financial support through their independent living program for a while until she finished high school. Faith had to sign a statement indicating she was told to leave her foster home and the independent living financial support continued until she and her husband were married.

Faith and her husband had one son, she worked full time, and she was finishing her general studies degree. Faith planned to transfer after graduation and begin working on her bachelor’s degree in social work. She said she wanted to become a social worker in order to help kids who were going through the same things she went through. She wanted to help them throughout the foster care system. Faith said, in her experience,

Nobody cares if you’re gonna be able to figure out what you do when you get out of that home. You’re their problem for the moment, but I just think there should be more instances where kids are taught what they need to do as adults.

**Gabe**

Gabe was an African-American male, age 26, who first entered foster care at age 14. He was placed in several different detention homes, group homes, and foster homes. Gabe said he was getting in trouble at school and on the streets and a judge ordered him to be placed in foster care. He described his final foster parent as follows: “She was mean, she was kinda demanding . . . it wasn’t easy at all.” Gabe was a ward of the court until age 18. He said he had some weekend home visits during his placement, but on his 18th birthday he finally went home for good.

Gabe said he could not believe he had made it through foster care and was finally able to go home. He reported mixed emotions related to leaving foster care. Although he did want to leave, and he felt he was ready, he was still nervous about the transition. Gabe said being in foster care was very structured. He had a certain time to eat, sleep, go to school, work on chores, and he followed a very repetitive daily routine. Once he was aged out of care, he said it took a while to realize he could do what he wanted, when he wanted, and it was a very strange feeling. Gabe said it took him a few years to grow up and maintain a productive schedule, but after working a few part-time jobs without really accomplishing anything, he decided to go back to school. At the time of his interview, he was enrolled as a part-time community college student studying project management while also working full time and living on his own.

**Ida**

Ida was a Hispanic-American female, age 19, who entered foster care at age 3 and aged out of foster care from her final kinship home placement. A typical day for her involved “breakfast, school. Um, we’d always have some sort of after-school program that me and my

siblings, we'd always participate in, whether it was band or drama, um, or something more academic." Ida said she felt that the extra-curricular activities really helped her and her siblings.

Ida's foster care placement was in a relative's home (kinship placement). The court was also able to place her three siblings in the same home. The kinship placement was ideal for Ida and her siblings, and they functioned as a family unit, going places together and sharing activities. Due to the kinship placement, Ida and her siblings had very limited interactions with social workers. Her preparations for independence came from school and her placement parent. She did remember how fearful she was when the time came for her to leave home and be on her own. She said the thoughts of working, paying bills, going to school, and taking care of everything on her own for the first time was very overwhelming for her. She was able to find a roommate to share expenses and continued to work part time and go to school full time.

### **Jack**

Jack was an African-American male, age 20, who first entered foster care at age 17. He described a typical day with his most recent, and only, family placement as "basically like any other family, you just come home after a hard day at school, guess say hi to your foster mom, mostly, I be in my room." Jack's younger sister and brother were placed in foster care at the same time. Jack and his brother were placed in the same home and their sister was placed in a home right across the street. Jack and his brother were able to stay close with their sister and see her every day, even outside of school. Jack said, "Luckily, me and my siblings only been in one foster home."

When Jack graduated from high school he wanted to continue his education; however, he had already turned 18. The DSS agency was able to place him in an independent living status, allowing him to remain in his foster home and pay rent to his foster parent. This is not a typical

independent living situation by DSS; however, it worked perfectly for Jack while he continued working part time and taking classes at the community college. Jack said his foster mom helped him get a bank account, and she helps him to save his money.

### **Kevin**

Kevin was an African-American male, age 26, who was placed in foster care when he was at a young school-age, but did not recall his actual age at the time of his foster care placement. He and his younger brother were placed in care, Kevin thought, over a misunderstanding of discipline on the part of his mother. Kevin said he and his brother were in their first foster home for about a month, and when they were allowed to come home, their mother said it would be best if they were somewhere else. He was not originally from Virginia, but was placed in care in southern Virginia with a relative, which did not end well for him. He described a typical day with his foster family as follows: "It wasn't a bad foster home. Not like so many stories I hear um. But there was a kid, he was about my age we played games all day and um, the mother, she was pretty cool."

Kevin had to leave his placement at age 17 because the relative moved from the area and he was not yet finished with high school and did not want to leave the area. Kevin was also a professional fighter and his trainer wanted to help him graduate from high school, so he allowed Kevin to live with him. Kevin did have regular contact with a social worker while he was in kinship placement. He said they had a good relationship. Kevin said he got into trouble at the agency once and his worker kept him from going to jail; therefore, he had a great deal of respect for her.

**Madison**

Madison was a Caucasian female, age 24, who was placed in foster care at age 13 and aged out of care from a foster family home. She described the family as follows: “They had a very large family. It was a older couple and they had, like, I think it was like 10 grandkids. So it was a rather big family.” Madison and her sister were placed with this family when she was in the seventh grade and stayed in the same home until she turned 18. Madison did return home for about four or five months during placement, but returned to foster care and to the same foster home. Madison said her foster parents were elderly and did not prepare her at all for independent living. She said she had no license, no job, was trying to finish high school, and did not receive any support at all from her foster parents. Madison left the foster home and moved in with the parents of her boyfriend (now her husband). She said without their support, she did not know how she would have made it on her own.

Madison maintained a part-time position at a community college working with other foster youth while completing her undergraduate studies. She said that a license, insurance, and transportation in general were so difficult for foster youth that she wanted to be in a position to help others as they go through what she had experienced. Madison was attending a university through an online program and working on her master’s degree. Madison was married and they had one daughter and according to Madison, “I have the family that I always hoped for.” Madison said they bought a house and own three vehicles, all of which they have accomplished on their own. Considering where she came from, Madison said she is “blessed.”

**Nate**

Nate was a Caucasian male, age 23, who was placed in foster care from a juvenile detention center at age 13. He stayed with the same foster family until he graduated high school,

aged out of care, and entered the military. At the time of the study, Nate was out of the military, working a full-time job, and married with one son. Nate was interested in continuing his education at a community college but had recently moved for work and was in the process of establishing stability for his family before taking on classes. Nate said his career goal was very important and he wanted to provide a good life for his family; therefore, his hope was to return to school very soon and begin working on a new career.

Nate described a typical day with his foster family as follows: “Start with a regular school day. I’d wake up, uh, my foster dad would come in, he’d wake me up, uh tell me, you know, start getting ready for school and everything . . . My foster mother would usually cook breakfast in the morning. I’d go downstairs, uh, sit at the table with them, uh, with my foster brother, uh, he was actually their biological son, I’d hang out with him.” Nate said that his foster home was very therapeutic in that they helped him deal with issues of his past and heal from deep hurts. He said not just his past problems, but his foster family helped him with everyday problems as well. He also indicated good relationships with his social workers over the years. Nate did not share the reason he was in the detention facility, just that “no kid should ever be put in there unless they did something really bad, not over something stupid.”

## **Results**

Three emerging themes resulted from the data analysis: theme one, future aspirations of participants; theme two, significant emotions related to aging out; theme three, the missing mentor component after aging out. Each participant provided a rich overview of the life-experiences associated with his or her time in, and transition from, foster care. The participants spoke of their immediate and future family and educational aspirations. They shared experiences in foster care that produced both positive [happy, excited, confident] and negative [terrified,

scared, confused] emotions. Some participants provided evidence that the missing mentor from their age out process negatively impacted the ease and success of gaining their independence, as well as the lack of having someone to guide them and encourage higher education. A few participants greatly benefited from having an adult role model to help them through the age out process. The impact of these emerging themes as revealed through interviews, focus groups, and picture card captions guided the analysis of data for this study.

The analysis of interviews, focus groups, and picture card captions was also used to answer the central research question and three sub questions. The central research question asked, “What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college?” The three sub research questions were as follows: How do participants describe the influence of the age out process on their life decisions? What is the participants’ perceived role of the state in the preparation of foster youth for independent living? How do participants describe the role of foster parents, guardians, and kinship caregivers in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?

### **Theme Development**

After careful analysis of transcribed interviews, focus groups, and picture card responses, the central research question and sub questions were used as the focus for compiling the data. The participants were asked the same 13 questions related to their age out experience. However, in some cases more probing questions were asked to best answer the core questions. It was not the purpose of this study to probe the reasons participants entered the foster care system; however, on many occasions some painful recollections of their experiences did emerge. The participants’ spoke of their goals as adults, both personal and academic, emotional and frustrating times in their lives, and the lack of supportive adult role models. Three specific

themes developed from participants' responses to the interview questions: aspirations, emotions, and the missing mentor.

The participants in this study, being from diverse backgrounds as well as geographical locations, expressed a variety of experiences related to the impact of foster care on their lives and on their life decisions. During analysis, the interview question responses were grouped together and data analyzed based on the central research question, three sub questions, and the three emerging themes. First, the researcher considered the phenomenon of aging out of foster care and its impact on higher education for each participant. Emerging theme one was closely associated with the participants desire for setting higher educational goals [central research question]. Participants' aspirations to achieve greater things in life than they were accustomed to in foster care enhanced their desire to seek out higher educational programs. Second, the researcher looked at the impact of foster care on the participants' life-decisions [sub question one]. Some participants reacted to the age out process based on emotions, which was emerging theme two, and those participants did not necessarily make the best life-decisions. Other participants expressed some of the same emotions toward the age out process, but they were able to rationalize those feelings and make better overall life-decisions. Third, the role of the state in the age out transition and the amount of life-skills training and preparation was tallied [sub question two]. Finally, the importance of the role that foster parents, guardians, kinship caregivers, and social workers contributed to the transition to independence for these participants was considered [sub question three]. The final theme three of the missing mentoring component emerged while discussing state workers, foster care providers, and kinship caregivers and the roles they played in the age out process.

## Emerging Themes

Three specific themes emerged through the analysis of the interview, focus group, and picture card findings. The following section introduces the three emerging themes: aspirations, emotions, and missing mentors. Following the explanation of each emerging theme, participants' comments that contributed to the theme are provided.

**Emerging theme one: aspirations.** Due to severe drug addiction, as in the case of Dakota's mother, or abuse, as in Kevin's case with his mother's mistreatment according to authorities, children are continually the victims of family dysfunction (Perfect et al., 2013). Just because these participants' families experienced dysfunction did not mean the children no longer desired contact with their biological families. Family-related aspirations for Eden were to leave her group home, which according to her was not a bad home, but she just wanted to return to her mother's home as soon as possible. Eden said she knew living on her own would be hard, and she just missed her mom and wanted to be living with her again. Anna said her mother's addiction to drugs caused every attempt she made to reunite with her to be a great disappointment; therefore, it was in her best interest to avoid her mother altogether. Anna's family aspirations were no longer based on biological relations.

Educational aspirations often seem to be out of reach for foster youth with research reporting fewer than 11% ever attaining a bachelor's degree (Salazar, 2013). Still, Faith's and Ida's success stories of pursuing their bachelor's degrees, Madison's success story of pursuing her master's degree, and Nate's enlistment in the military after graduation were indicative of the resilience of human nature and the drive to be successful in life, regardless of the barriers one must face (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Even Eden, who seemed to be the least motivated toward higher education said, "Surround yourself with positive people, you going to

succeed in life, and prove others wrong who doubted you when you was younger, show them, I can do this, if you say you can do it then you can do anything that you put your mind to.”

Focus Group 2 analysis contributed to the aspirations theme and the responses to questions were often echoed among the participants. Focus Group 2 participants—Anna, Bailey, Ida, and Madison—reported on things they would need to be truly happy in life which included being able to provide for their children beyond just the necessities and to reconnect with a biological parent. The desire to reconnect with family also supported the missing mentor theme. Focus Group 2 offered advice to the 17-year-old foster youth who is about to age out of care. Anna recommended saving up some money first. She made a list of things she wanted to do; however, the list had never been checked off, mainly due to money. She also recommended they secure at least a learner’s permit, if not their driver’s license, which they would need a mentor to advocate before they aged out of care. Bailey agreed with all of Anna’s suggestions. Ida said she would tell her younger self to set better goals and “to have a more realistic plan, you know, not everything is given to you, you definitely have to work really hard for everything that you want in life.” Madison agreed with Ida’s advice, and added it was important to “never give up on your dreams . . . never let your past determine where you go . . . I just kind of feel lost . . . like you didn’t get to do what you wanted, but there is always time, hum, never give up on that.”

Picture card captions also contributed to the emerging theme of aspirations. Two participants selected a picture of a prison fence for two very different reasons, but both related to aspirations. One participant said it meant, “Nobody’s perfect, everyone makes mistakes,” while the same picture to the other participant signified, “Constantly surround ourselves in a barrier of how far we think we can go, but if we keep pushing past what we think we’re good enough for and break those barriers, we can succeed further than we thought we could.” To another

participant, a picture of coins signified “a businessman and travel.” As participants reviewed the choices of pictures, it was evident from their responses that their focus was on their future aspirations.

**Emerging theme two: emotions.** Foster care left these participants with both positive and negative emotional memories. For some of these participants the desire to sever their association with foster family problems drove them to exit the program as soon as possible. All Bailey wanted to do was to leave her final foster home where she kept herself hidden away in seclusion most of the time. Although Bailey’s sister was in the home with her, she always felt alone. Dakota shared feeling alone most of her life and she thought independent living would just make her feel even more isolated. Madison wanted to leave foster care because she always felt like she was a burden to her elderly foster family. Eden just signed herself out of care because she longed to return to her biological mother, the very situation from which she had been removed, as did Caden who shared feelings of sadness and confusion. Faith was abruptly forced to leave her foster home, leaving her scared, alone, and angry.

There were still equally impressive stories of successful foster care placements that emerged from this study. Ida received kinship care placement when she was 3 years old, along with three of her siblings, and they each remained in their home until coming of age and pursuing higher education and employment goals. Ida and her siblings were nurtured in their kinship home; she shared that she was safe and loved. Nate entered foster care from a juvenile detention facility at age 13 and he described a wonderful, loving family with whom he continues to hold a very close and supportive bond. After graduation, Nate enlisted in the Army, served his country, met and married his wife, and had a son. He reported having stable employment and looking forward to taking college courses in the near future while he enjoys his growing family.

Nate contributed his success to the love and encouragement he gained from his foster family and the confidence he gained from his military service.

The picture card analysis also contributed to the emotional theme. Four participants selected a picture of two overlapping hearts and captioned things like, “a forever loving home” and “I love life and am so grateful to be alive.” Two participants chose a picture of a mother and child. One said the picture signified the bond between mother and child, and the other said it reminded him of his desire for a growing family. These participants voiced the importance of love and security that belongs in a thriving family unit. Another picture selected was of a giant question mark, which that participant said represented, “confused and unsure” which were also emotions expressed during interviews and focus groups.

Focus Group 1 analysis significantly contributed to the emotions theme. Focus Group 1 included Caden, Dakota, Eden, and Faith. Focus Group 1 participants were asked to describe their thoughts at age 17 concerning leaving foster care. Faith reported that she felt leaving her foster home would be a dream come true. She also reported the day she turned 18, she was told by her foster parent she had to pack up and leave. Faith said that in that moment she was shocked, and it also left her confused and terrified. Faith said, “When I left my foster home I was actually kicked out in the middle of the night and it was winter and literally like three foot of snow on the ground. So, I had absolutely no idea what to do, I just started walking.” Faith reported that due to having nowhere else to go, she found herself back in the home of her biological mother, which was not a good situation. Others reported thoughts of nervousness and excitement, but Dakota said she had always been alone and thoughts of being independent made her feel even more alone. Caden and Eden said they were excited at the thought of going home; they just wanted to be reunited with their biological mothers. The emotional aspect of aging out

of foster care was a significant factor in the life-decisions for these participants once they began making their own decisions.

**Emerging theme three: missing mentor.** Mentors provide emotional support for their mentees, which in families typically falls to parents or other significant adults. However, mentor relationships are clearly vital to foster youth who have transitioned from care (Curry & Abrams, 2015; Pears et al., 2015). The missing mentor was a significant factor for 10 of these 12 participants. With adequate support, direction, and encouragement, it was evident that foster children were able to successfully transition to independence and higher education programs. Unfortunately, the mentor role for these participants was primarily filled by academic coaches in their community colleges rather than social workers or other foster care providers during the age out process. With the exception of two participants, all have at least enrolled in a community college credit, or credential program. The two who are not enrolled were both interested in enrolling soon and pursuing a degree, certificate, trade, or credential. Although these participants may not have chosen a direct path to postsecondary education from foster care, they all indicated an understanding of the importance of education, and they were each in the process of pursuing those goals.

The missing mentor theme for most of the participants emerged during their age out transition. Faith was forced to leave her foster home without warning or notice. Anna was adopted at 17 but returned to foster care when it did not end well with the family. Kevin found himself homeless at age 17 with no idea where he was going to live. Gabe said he could always find a couch to sleep on, and he could get comfortable anywhere; in essence, he was homeless as well. Madison married shortly after exiting an independent living program, and she reported having no one to turn to for answers to life's basic questions: how to get insurance, how to apply

for a loan, how to open a checking account, etc. She said she mostly had to figure it out on her own, and she had no idea where to start. Table 2 provides an overview of specific aspirations (educational), emotions (positive and negative), and the missing mentors for participants during the age out process.

Table 2

*Theme Development*

Participants	Aspirations	Emotions	Missing Mentors
Anna	Earn GED	unprepared, upset, confused	No mentor
Bailey	Plans to enroll CC1	excited, happy, “buck wild”	No mentor
Caden	Plans to enroll CC2	confusion, sad, happy	No mentor
Dakota	Enrolled CC1	lonely, nervous, scared	No mentor
Eden	Plans to enroll CC2	confusion, nervous, doubt	No mentor
Faith	Enrolled university	confusion, terrified	No mentor
Gabe	Enrolled CC1	overwhelmed, no confidence, uncomfortable, scared, happy, freedom, nervous, felt unreal, light-headed, slow-motion	No mentor
Ida	Enrolled CC3	really scared, pressure, overwhelmed, stressed, nervous	No mentor
Jack	Enrolled CC1	unknown	Mentor available DSS and foster family
Kevin	Enrolled CC1	confident, happy, great feeling	No mentor
Madison	Enrolled university	unfair, tons of anxiety, slight depression, grateful, unknown future	No mentor
Nate	Enroll CC2	mixed feelings of leaving dear friends, but not a permanent disconnect, grief	Mentor available DSS and foster family

## **Answers to Research Questions**

In addition to three emerging themes, this study aimed to give voice to participants and share their personal age out experiences. The 13 interview questions (InQ-1 through InQ-13), two focus groups, and individual captions for picture cards were also analyzed to answer the central research question and three sub research questions.

**Answers to central research question:** The central research question asked, “What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college?” To answer the central research question, participants shared their experiences related to aging out of foster care and being enrolled in community college programs. InQ-1, InQ-2, and InQ-3 addressed a brief introduction, how long participants had been involved with foster care, and their current college enrollment status. Ida was enrolled in a community college transfer program and planned to choose a university in the near future. Dakota, Gabe, Jack, and Kevin were also enrolled in community college programs. Faith was enrolled at a university for her bachelor’s degree and Madison was enrolled at a university working on her master’s degree. While Anna, Bailey, Caden, and Nate were all interested in achieving higher educational goals, family needs and other barriers hindered their enrollment.

**Answers to sub question one:** Sub question one asked, “How do participants describe the influence of the age out process on their life decisions?” InQ-11 asked participants to describe their worldview, which influenced their life choices. Participants had difficulty relating life’s decisions to their age out experiences. Bailey said she loves her children dearly, but sometimes wishes she had waited to have children until she could be a better provider for them. Nate thought about his life-choices and stated he would probably have stayed in the military longer if he had that choice to make again, but he would not trade his wife and son for anything.

Eden and Caden said they just wanted to go back home, but that decision ultimately led to even more difficulties, as the family struggles at home had not changed. Ida said,

I think . . . you're always going to have to work hard for it, nothing is ever given out . . . nothing just comes easy to you, you have to work for everything you want in your life and if you don't, it kind of just falls apart from there.

InQ-13 asked for any suggestions participants could offer to improve the age out process for other foster youth. One suggestion that continued to emerge was the need for training and continuous contact and support for social workers. Jack recommended, "More . . . talking to us, calling us, more about what's going on, not having to hunt them [social workers] down." Ida said,

I think a lot of preparation is needed . . . I had all that overwhelming stress on me . . . I didn't know how to . . . do anything really and I think having training . . . to let these foster youth know what to expect . . . get them used to . . . the adult world.

Anna said, "I would just recommend really being strict on having classes like budgeting like just preparing for you know just let kids know just straight up it's not going to be easy." Caden said,

I think, more help from my social worker . . . instead of just being in a program, like I think if she would like, started interacted more with me than just seeing me at the end of each month, it would have helped me more.

While most of these participants had similar suggestions for the age out process, Nate's foster family was unique and provided exceptional foster parent care. Nate's suggestions for the age out process were directed at the overall age of the foster youth and the mental health of the child at the time. Nate's point was that just because someone reaches the physical age of an adult does

not mean that child has the ability to function as an adult in an independent living situation. These factors were particularly influential in making life decisions for these participants.

**Answers to sub question two:** Sub question two asked, “What is the participants’ perceived role of the state in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?” When asked about the state agency’s participation in their age out process, seven participants in this study indicated they received assistance from their agency, and five participants recalled they received no assistance from their agencies. Independent living was the primary benefit these participants received from their agencies after leaving their foster care homes or facility, one of which was still participating in an independent living program. Nate mention a program called “Commonwealth Challenge” which he participated in but did not complete. The program “was like a military regiment boot camp for at-risk youth.” The program encouraged cadets to earn their GED; however, Nate wanted to finish high school and enlist in the army. Therefore, he left the program and returned to his foster home to finish high school. While five participants reported receiving no assistance from their agencies, Eden stated that at age 18, she signed herself out of care and returned to the home of her biological mother. In cases such as this, state agencies are not allowed to provide continuing services to foster youth who choose to leave foster care on their own.

It was important to this study to determine if social workers were more interactive with foster youth who were about to age out of care. Faith remembered her social worker typically visited the home while she was in school; therefore, she rarely interacted with her at all:

No, I mean, they never really came around that often, maybe once every six months I would see her. Where, the last foster home I stayed at, she, the foster mother, told me she had come to visit that day, but I didn’t really see them a lot.

Jack said, “I guess, they don’t, don’t communicate that good. If you gonna see one of them, you gotta like, see them to know what’s happening.” Jack said that although DSS held independent living sessions monthly, it was still difficult to get information or speak with a social worker about other issues outside of those scheduled meetings. Kevin experienced kinship placement during his middle-school years; however, he described no substantial support or encouragement from a DSS worker. Kevin said, “It wasn’t good, I had had no choice because I was trying to finish school, had a bunch of family problems.” Madison said, “I felt like, a lot of times . . . whatever I said was gonna, . . . get me in trouble . . . if I complained about anything. So I pretty much just went along with it, you know.” Rather than developing a relationship between foster youth and social workers, most communication occurred between foster parents and social workers.

**Answers to sub question three:** Sub question three asked, “How do participants describe the role of foster parents, guardians, and kinship caregivers in the preparation of foster youth for independent living?” The participants were asked to describe how their foster families helped with preparations for independent living. Anna recalled, “I remember going to one class in like Lynchburg . . . they had you do budgeting . . . that was good information.” Caden received goal setting challenges in the group home, Eden recalled watching the foster parent while cooking and cleaning until she could do it on her own, and Dakota said her foster mother helped her prepare resumes and online job applications that led to employment. Ida received her driver’s license while still in her placement home. Jack’s foster mom helped him open a bank account, taught him about saving money, earning money, grocery shopping, as well as cooking, cleaning, and other chores that helped him prepare for independence. Perhaps the most complete and positive recollection of foster parents’ influence on the age out process came from Nate:

They taught me everything from balancing a checkbook to changing a diaper. Uh, I learned everything I needed to learn. Uh, extremely hands-on, independent living, I learned how to cook, clean, uh, every weekend, she'd teach me how to clean something new, and whether it was windows or floor tiles. I even learned how to uh, I even learned how to do trades with my foster father. He taught me, uh, he taught me everything from hands-on carpentry work; we installed hardwood floors and drywall in his house. I learned all kinds of cool stuff like that, learned basic vehicle maintenance, changing the oil.

Nate also said, "I actually call Mom and Dad still to this day. I call any questions I have." Nate said he learned many life-skills while with his foster family, and they helped him and encouraged him with every new challenge he faced. He said he was really a member of the family and had an almost immediate bond with them when they first met.

Madison shared that her foster parent was elderly and had difficulty getting around, so she did her own laundry, cooked, and cleaned for her foster mother. However, budgeting, finances, bill paying were all things Madison had to learn on her own. Faith and Kevin were both forced from their placement homes with no warning or preparation. Gabe indicated that while in the group home, he could set milestones and earn privileges by reaching them; however, the milestones did not encompass any significant independent living skills. Bailey indicated that her independent living skills came from the help of her social worker, not from her foster parents. Bailey said she had a stable foster placement, but the family was elderly and did not take an interest in her life. She felt confined and stayed in her room. Once she was on her own, she stated, "I went buck-wild." Jack's foster care situation was unique from the other participants in that he was still participating in an independent living program. This particular

program allowed him to remain with his foster parent while he continued with school. The agency provided him with independent living funds, which he in turn used a portion to pay his foster mother for rent. Jack said of his foster family, “It’s basically like any other family.”

Anna said she was very connected to one foster family and in fact, “I was adopted actually by that family . . . and it didn’t end well.” Before she aged out, she returned to foster care after the adoption did not work out. Anna said, “They don’t really talk to me no more . . . I am not allowed to go back to their house for some reason, because I decided to leave.” Faith described a relatively normal foster care placement until she turned 18. Faith said the foster mother “just blindsided me, I came home one day from school and she told me I was going to have to move out.” Gabe said he was in “seven or eight group homes in the past four years.” After that he “ended up going to like juvenile hall” before a group home placement. Madison described her foster family experience as “a lot of things like, unfair in the home.” Caden, Eden, Jack, and Nate reported similar positive experiences, while Anna, Faith, Gabe, and Madison shared similar negative experiences. Caden was in a group home while in foster care, and he described positive aspects of the group home such as friendships with the other kids that were there and playing games. Eden said she was in four or five different foster homes, but the last was a residential home. She said she learned, “You surround yourself with positive people, that’s the only thing people gonna see is the positive.”

The following table indicates the participants’ responses, either positive or negative, to questions that focused on the three research sub questions:

Table 3

*Research Sub Questions*

Influence of aging out on life's decisions		Role of the state		Role of foster parents, kinship caregivers and group homes	
Positive	Negative	Support	No Support	Support	No Support
4	8	7	5	8	4

**Summary**

This transcendental phenomenological study intended to give voice to those who had aged out of foster care and pursued, or planned to pursue, higher education. Twelve participants from five community colleges in five rural regions in Virginia who had aged out of foster care participated in individual interviews, focus groups, and other data gathering methods to complete this study. A brief introduction of the participants and participants' input was provided with specific details of their unique encounters with the foster care system. Giving voice to the participants' stories and review of their individual situations was presented in the results section. Participants' interviews, focus groups, and picture card captions provided data that developed the three emerging themes: aspirations, emotions, and missing mentors. These data were also used to answer the central research question and three sub research questions. The central research question focused on the shared phenomenon of participants aging out of foster care and pursuing higher educational goals. The sub questions focused on the foundation of the age out process, influences on their life decisions, and support they received during the process.

The foster care system, even with its obvious flaws such as lack of appropriate numbers of foster homes, high turnover of social workers, and limited resources, still produces success stories of resilient young adults who have positively transitioned to independence. It is

important to the field of education to identify resilience in students enrolled in higher education programs to encourage completion and student success. Identifying areas that need revision and where the system lacks support will hopefully lead to the creation of positive changes for children entering and exiting foster care.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

Local DSS agencies have made significant progress in caring for children over the past 200 years, beginning with the Orphan Trains of the 1800s and the “placing out” system of the late 1800s (Chiodo & Meliza, 2014). However, from the perspective of the children who have aged out of today’s foster care, the system still needs improvement. The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of young adults who had aged out of the foster care system and pursued, or were planning to pursue, higher educational goals. This final chapter provides a brief summary of the findings based on one central research question, three sub questions, and three emerging themes. This discussion includes theoretical implications as related to the foundational theories of Maslow (1970) and Bronfenbrenner (1979). Inferences from current literature discussed in Chapter Two are included in the implications section, which also addresses methodological and practical implications. Delimitations and limitations are reviewed as well as recommendations for future research. The chapter concludes with a final summary of this study.

### **Summary of Findings**

The purpose of this study was to give voice to foster youth who aged out of foster care and sought higher educational achievement. The central research question for this study asked, “What are the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college?” To provide insights for the age out experiences of foster youth, this study provided 12 participants with the opportunity to speak to those unique experiences from a personal perspective. The participants detailed their involvement with foster care systems, their individual age out experiences, and the current station of their lives as well as their educational pursuits. These 12 participants had risen above many obstacles to gain their independence from

the foster care system; however, different obstacles still hindered educational attainment for some of these participants. Bailey, Nate, Faith, Dakota, and Madison all had children, families, and full-time employment that ultimately took priority of their time. Caden and Eden returned to the homes of their biological mothers. Because they felt this was their best option at the time, and they both missed their families, they signed themselves out of care. Now both are struggling to stay in school, as their education can no longer take top priority like many of their other personal goals. While other participants were still in the process of establishing their plans for enrollment, Madison was working on her master's degree and Faith and Ida were working on their bachelor's degrees.

Three sub questions were also investigated which probed the individual readiness and preparation provided to these foster youth prior to aging out. It was important to this study to include the participants' perspectives of the impact on their life decisions by being involved with the foster care system; support they did, or did not, receive from the state; and support they did, or did not, receive from their foster parents. A holistic view of these 12 individuals' experiences revealed many unfortunate gaps in the stressed social service system related to foster care and the age out process. Their stories also revealed resilience and persistence that they were originally unaware they even possessed.

### **Sub Question One**

Sub question one addressed the impact of foster care on life decisions. Although none of the participants in this study was incarcerated after leaving foster care, Kevin indicated that if it were not for a very understanding social worker, he would have faced multiple charges, including assault, when he aged out of care. Bailey said she dearly loves her children, and she would do anything for them; however, she often regrets not waiting to have children until she

was finished with school and had a better job. Nate said his major regret was not staying longer in the military. He said he was ready to start his family and had no regrets there, but he felt that the military contributed to his stability. He knew the military would have supported his educational goals. Nate's goals for higher education will be difficult to accomplish with a family to support (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). The impact on major life decisions was evident in both accomplishments and regrets shared by participants. Understanding the mindset of foster youth encourages the construction and evaluation of curriculum used to teach independent living skills (Dolan & Grotevant, 2014). Independent living skills and individual development are vital components for foster youth to become successful adults.

### **Sub Question Two**

Sub question two addressed the involvement of state agencies to assist foster youth through the age out process. The evidence was clear that state programs do exist that are designed to assist foster youth as they prepare to age out. Jack said he was allowed to pay rent to his foster parent through a state independent living program and remain in his foster home while he finished school. Bailey and Gabe both had apartments through independent living programs just after their 18th birthday. There was equal evidence that not every foster youth received the benefit of those programs: some did not receive benefits by their choice while others were not offered assistance. Faith said that her foster parent forced her to leave her home without warning shortly after she turned 18. The participants' stories in this study were in agreement with current literature that supports the need for programs that promote independent living skills, employment skills, and the importance of maintaining a healthy life that includes mental stability and self-confidence (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016).

### **Sub Question Three**

Sub question three investigated the involvement of foster parents, guardians, and group home leaders in preparing foster youth for the age out process. This study also provided evidence that kinship placement could be either beneficial or harmful to foster youth, just as foster families and group home placement had equally contrasting results. Prior research found significant benefits with kinship placement (Blakely et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2014) and additional indications that placing children with relatives whenever possible is in their best interest (Hunter et al., 2014). Kevin shared that his kinship placement had a negative impact as it eventually led to his being homeless at age 17 when his grandmother unexpectedly moved, and he was not allowed to go with her. At the age of 17 and no longer having contact with a social worker, Kevin made his future decisions on his own. Although Kevin had a familial bond with his grandmother, she made the decision to move, which was in her best interest not Kevin's, and that decision led to extensive separation and discord from Kevin's other biological family members. Nate's bond with his first, and only foster family, remained strong, even after he aged out of care. Nate said his foster family truly provided the parental support he needed and they are still an important part of his life. State-sponsored foster care workshops and trainings often discourage foster families from becoming too attached to children in their care (Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012; Troughton, 2013); however, a family bond, even if not a biological family, is a vital component to promote the emotional health of foster children.

### **Discussion**

There are currently many quantitative studies related to the foster care system, although few studies specifically focus on the age out process (Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2016). This empirical investigation into the lives of foster youth who have experienced the age out process

added valuable qualitative data to the field of research. Current literature on foster care supports the importance of programs that train foster youth with independent living skills, employment skills, and maintaining a healthy lifestyle (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). This study served to point out that some agencies are not providing adequate training and preparation for independence. Some foster youth received some training but still felt unprepared for what they must face as adults. Foster youth such as Ida and Dakota developed individual strengths to cope with trauma, which served to lower risky behaviors while placed in kinship care (Blakely et al., 2017). Nate had a very healthy foster care experience with a nurturing and supportive family unit, which was his only foster placement, and he also did not display risky behaviors while in foster care. The impact of numerous placements and the duration of being in foster care (Forenza, & Happonen, 2016) significantly affected Dakota's and Eden's sense of belonging to a family unit. Dakota felt she would always be alone, and Eden just wanted to return to her mother and siblings.

Previous research was highly supportive of kinship placements (Blakely et al., 2017); however, it was evident from this study that caution and wisdom should be used even with kinship placement. Regular visits with social workers are necessary to continue to monitor the progress for the child and for the family. Often kinship placement is with a grandparent simply because they do not wish to become estranged from their grandchildren, as would likely happen with foster placement. The problem then arises, such as in Kevin's situation, where his elderly grandmother had to move for health reasons and left him homeless at 17. He was not about to report himself to DSS and found an alternate solution and moved in with his trainer. With the new law (H.R.253, 2017) allowing compensation for kinship providers, the state will likely become more active in kinship placements through consistency and connection that will reduce

the possibility of Kevin's situation occurring as often. Healthy self-determination and preservation help foster youth like Kevin to change their circumstances to better suit their life plans and goals (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

The novelty of this transcendental phenomenological study was the unique descriptive stories of aging out for these participants. Although these participants aged out of group homes, foster homes, independent living, and kinship placement homes, each story brought insight to the process from the perspective of those who experienced aging out. The emerging themes from each of their stories do much to enhance the research in this prevalent area in society and in higher education in particular. Knowing the background of these participants and some of their life stories makes the advising/counseling relationship richer and more empathetic to their tendencies to respond or to react in certain ways to certain situations. This understanding contributes quality and richness to the research related to foster children, particularly older children, who need to establish educational goals as they prepare to exit the foster care system.

The results of this study further support the foundational theories on which this study was based. Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs theory states that basic needs serve as motivators that push people to action, but that higher needs become less relevant as survival becomes the priority. This was particularly true for the participants of this study. While the participants who received the most support and encouragement were able to pursue higher education [Ida, Jack, Faith, Madison, and Nate], those with less than ideal age out experiences [Anna, Bailey, Caden, Dakota, Eden, Kevin, and Gabe] struggle to engage higher educational programs. The survival mode was very prevalent for both groups, and there was evidence of mixed supportive networks that drove these individuals toward success.

The secondary theory of this study was based on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described the microsystem and mesosystem as the environments most closely surrounding the child. This theory provided useful applications for understanding foster youth, and in particular the lived experiences of these participants. The surrounding environment for participants in this study, although diverse, had one major commonality: the origin of dysfunction occurred in their homes with their biological parents. In cases of abuse and/or neglect the state finds cause to remove children from their parents in an effort to protect them from further harm (Guggenheim, 2015). This process was enacted through the removal of the children from their home, by a DSS agency, through a court order issued by the presiding judge. It was not the intention of DSS to place the children in new meso- and microsystems that were less than ideal. Unfortunately, agencies are limited to the available registered foster homes and how many children they can accommodate at the time of entry to the foster care program (Paul-Ward & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016).

### **Empirical Literature**

Kinship care placement has proven beneficial to children who were placed in the custody of the state (Blakely et al., 2017; Hunter et al., 2014). Placing children with relatives gives them a child-focused alternative plan that allows children to reside, in most cases, with those with whom they are familiar (Font, 2014). For Ida and her three siblings, a kinship placement was ideal; however, kinship placement left Kevin homeless at age 17. A former advantage of kinship placement was its financial benefit to the state, as unlicensed kinship parents were not compensated for providing care for related children (Font, 2014).

In February 2017, a law was signed to allow for compensation by the state to be paid to relatives who provide care to related children in the custody of the state (H.R.253, 2017). This

portion of the law was intended to encourage relatives to open their homes to the placement of related children without placing a financial burden on the family. The signing of this law also made available the option for respite care services extended to kinship families, which was not previously available (Madden et al., 2016). Typically, respite care was only available to caregivers of adults or children with debilitating physical or mental disabilities; however, families providing kinship care for children of relatives would benefit from a backup plan for providing care as well (Madden et al., 2016).

The transition to independent living specific to older foster youth and their training was crucial to a successful outcome (Ahmann & Dokken, 2017). The participants in this study had varying recollections of training and preparations they received prior to aging out of care. Anna recalled a trip to Lynchburg for a class on budgeting that was helpful, but by the time she left care, she did not recall any other training. Bailey said she was so happy to leave her foster home that she almost did not graduate from high school because of going “buck wild” at her new independence. Nate said his foster family taught him everything from how to hang drywall to how to change a diaper. He said he felt well prepared for the next phase of his life. He also added his attempt to reconnect with his biological family was, in hindsight, a big mistake. Nate said he realized they were not ever looking out for his best interest and they never would. However, Nate shared that his foster parents were very supportive of him during that process as well.

The history of placement for the participants, their ages, the number as well as the type of home placements, and the impact of each of those placements (Forenza, & Happonen, 2016) were also relative to this study. Nate’s supportive foster family provided for him for the duration of his time in care. He never had to change schools and the family remained in a stable home

setting for his full five to six years of care. Ida similarly reported a stable and loving family home that not only provided for her but her three siblings as well. Although Jack did not enter foster care with both of his siblings in the same home, his brother was with him and his sister was just across the road. Rather than forcing Jack out at age 18, he was allowed to remain in his foster home through an independent living program. Jack's foster mom helped him set up a saving and checking account, helped him budget his stipend from DSS and his part time job, and helped him to balance school and work through time management tips.

### **Theoretical Literature**

Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs offered a provisional ideal that certain physiological needs must be met prior to one reaching for goals that provided stature or pleasure in life. This theory was the foundational theory of this study as many of the participants reported being homeless at some point in their lives. Kevin and his younger brother left their mom's home on foot, without supervision, due to disciplinary issues. Kevin guessed he was about 9 years old at the time. Later Kevin said he could always find someone's couch to sleep on, so it was no real surprise to him to be homeless again at age 17. Faith said that just after she turned 18, her foster mother told her she had to leave. She said it was winter, there was snow on the ground, and she left walking with nowhere to go. Faith finally got a ride to her biological mother's home, "which was not a good situation." Faith was able to move from her mother's shortly after; however, it was devastating to be forced from a bad situation and into foster care, just to be forced by the same system right back into a bad situation.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory offered the viewpoint that the system most closely surrounding the individual provided for the greatest influences in shaping the individual and the choices he or she made. This was relative to foster youth in particular because

the very system [microsystem] that was meant to provide support, nurturing, and sustainability was the focal point of their family dysfunction. Foster youth, now young adults, had to come to terms with the fact that their biological families would not be the providers they need in life. As young adults on their own, these participants were establishing their own microsystems in which they were very selective of whom they allowed to reside close to them. Anna said she would always love her mother, but her mother would always love drugs more than Anna, so it was better to let “mom go” and move on with her life. Anna stated she tried visiting her mother several times and she would just leave more hurt than before she came, so she was trying to refrain from visiting with her at all. Dakota said she had no idea how to locate her mother, and she did not know if she would want to see her even if she could. Some of these participants seemed to have relocated their biological families, at least their parents, into an outer realm of their ecological system, perhaps to the ecosystem with minimal interaction, or in some cases such as Anna and Dakota, the macrosystem, where their existence was acknowledged but lacked influence.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of 12 foster youth who had experienced the age out process and sought to enroll in higher educational programs. The lived experiences of former foster youth contribute valuable insight to the age out process. The following sections bring attention to the empirical, theoretical, and practical implications of the study. This section includes recommendations for various stakeholders, such as policy makers, administrators, educators, community leadership programs, mentors, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and group home administrators.

## **Empirical Implications and Recommendations**

The participants in this study, and all foster youth for that matter, have experienced some type of family dysfunction at their most basic station, in their home. The results of that dysfunction meant entering the foster care system, which in most cases further complicated an exceedingly negative family perspective. Although this study focused on the age out experience of participants and their preparation for independent living, participants indicated there was a void in their lives that was meant to be fulfilled by their biological families. Some participants left the foster care system just to return to the same dysfunctional home from which they were removed, particularly Caden and Eden, due to their longing to restore their biological familial connection. Other participants indicated that although they viewed connections with biological parents as toxic, they still desired to reconnect (e.g., Anna and Nate).

While it remains an objective of the foster care system to reunite children with their biological parents (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), in the most severe cases a reunion is not deemed in the best interest of the child by the juvenile court system. In the cases of these participants who wanted to be reunited with their biological parents, it was not evident the participant was physically or emotionally prepared to return to a toxic situation or that either participant had the means to self-protect, even as an adult. Once a foster child turns 18, it is no longer a matter for the state to decide his or her future; therefore, when foster children sign themselves out of care, the authority of the state no longer has jurisdiction.

It was evident from the participants' stories that young people in difficult situations do not make the best life choices. The consequences of those choices either positively or negatively influence future decisions, depending on the individual's perspective. Nate, a 23-year-old male, was placed in a foster home from a juvenile detention facility. It was obvious from his statement

that he did not believe he ever belonged in detention and once he found a family, he was able to thrive with that same family through high school graduation and enrollment in the military. Nate was blessed to find his foster family, which was the perfect fit for him. This family was unique in their training and dedication to providing quality family care for all their foster children. Nate's case also validates the importance of adult mentors who continue to support foster youth after they have aged out of care (Greeson, Garcia, et al., 2015). However, not all placement homes work out so well for foster children. Therefore, it is imperative that ample training and intervention occur throughout placement. Visits from social workers need to be improved to include family counseling, individual counseling for all children and supportive counseling, as well as suggested behavior modification techniques for foster parents as needed.

Some of the participants in this study thrived in the group home setting with counselors on staff and friendships with other youth in similar situations. Caden, a 20-year-old male, said he experienced mixed feelings about leaving his group home because he knew he would miss his friends and mentors. Caden returned to his biological mother after turning 18. He enrolled at a community college but had to drop out in order to take advantage of a full-time employment opportunity, which is often the case for the decisions of foster youth who aged out of care (Paul-Ward, & Lambdin-Pattavina, 2016). Coaching on life skills, access to funding streams to help foster youth stay in school, and counseling for the transition home could have been useful resources for Caden through his age out process.

Another empirical implication of this study was the evidence of the value participants placed on higher education. These participants were primarily recruited due to their involvement or interest in reaching higher educational goals. They each indicated a desire to better themselves and their situations, which was especially important to the participants who already

had children. Unfortunately, the participants with children, as well as those who signed themselves out of foster care, have found that achieving higher educational goals while providing and maintaining a stable life for their family was even more challenging, especially without the appropriate and necessary support (Day et al., 2013; Greeson, 2013; Greeson, Thompson, et al., 2014; Thompson & Greeson, 2017; Thompson et al., 2016). Administrators of higher education programs could make a more conscious effort to reach foster youth and ensure they are aware of the variety of scholarships and other resources that were designed to help all students reach their educational goals.

Agencies tend to get comfortable with the status quo rather than take on additional work, even when the need for change is evident. A major step to foster care reform was the signing of H.R.253 law in February 2017. Additional recommendations for empirical improvements as related to the signing of this law would include the proper training, counseling, and support of kinship care providers and their families. Bringing a child into a relative's home may be the best placement choice for the child, but if it disrupts the current family unit, additional support must be available. Just as certified foster parents attend various trainings to remain foster care providers, ample trainings should be available for kinship caregivers as well. The problem does not become resolved with the placement of the child in a home. Monitoring of kinship placements would also be a valid recommendation as many placements are with elderly grandparents whose health status may at times rapidly decline.

Madison said when the social worker visited she felt afraid, like she would get in trouble, if she mentions that she was having any problems or that anything was wrong. Foster children need a means to express their problems without fear of negative repercussions. Regular outings between the social worker, foster care worker, or ongoing service care providers and the foster

child would provide a neutral atmosphere where the child does not feel intimidation for saying whatever might need to be said in private. The child may not be having real problems with the placement per se, but may just need a trusted adult to listen to his or her frustrations. The social worker then has the opportunity to redirect the focus and help the child rationalize the situation. This would also provide the foster parent some reprieve from care, a short break, which could provide time for attending to personal needs or interests. While some recommendations do involve legislative changes, some of these simple suggestions could be initiated locally with minimal cost to agencies.

### **Theoretical Implications and Recommendations**

Maslow (1970) introduced his theory based on how he interpreted human nature and the natural instinct of survival. Especially for these participants with children, their instinct for survival has surpassed couch surfing and job-hopping. Five of them now have children of their own who are depending on them to meet those basic survival needs. As a social worker, this researcher observed generational cycles of dysfunction, which was unfortunately evident in some of these participants as well. Eden, a 19-year-old female, said she signed herself out of the group home when she turned 18 in order to return to live with her biological mother. Eden stated, “I had my mom there to support me and take care of me, so I knew it would be hard trying to do it all on my own, instead of somebody doing it for me.” Even though, at age 18, Eden was given the opportunity to sign herself out of care, she was not prepared to support herself in an independent living situation.

Kevin said, “I can always find somewhere to sleep, that’s no problem,” but that was not the ideal situation for someone trying to gain his independence. Several agencies, even in rural localities, have access to a number of apartments in complexes that are available for foster youth

who enter independent living status. Perhaps if Faith had been made aware of the independent living option, she would not have been forced to leave her foster home, at night, walking in the snow, only to return to her mother's home, from which she had been removed just two years prior. It was evident from Faith's description that the age out process was an additional traumatic experience for her. It should be the goal of each agency to plan for a smooth transition to independence for foster youth, even if that plan is to return to their biological home as is their choice; the agency should, at the very least, provide transportation to the next placement location at the time of exit. Additionally, foster youth should be provided with multiple options and made aware of resources to support them in whatever plan they choose.

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory places the immediate relationships surrounding a child in the microsystem, which unfortunately is where the major dysfunction for foster children occurs. The only escape for children in abusive or neglectful situations is removal from the microsystem with which they are familiar and introduction to a new microsystem meant to meet their basic needs through a higher functioning and more stable system. Some age out experiences were positive for the participants in this study; other age out experiences were not. Sometimes the negative outcomes were due to a lack of adequate resources, while other times negative outcomes were attributed to poor or uninformed decisions made by the participants during a pivotal and vulnerable time in their lives.

Counseling and life skills training are vital components for youth prior to exiting foster care. Unfortunately, foster youth do not consistently receive adequate training. Even in the best of scenarios, foster youth reported feeling unprepared for independent living, even if it was what they had been working to achieve. The theoretical findings of Maslow (1970) were relevant to the dismantling of even the best transition plans for aging out of care due to the participants'

primary need of survival. One minor incident could cause major setbacks for foster youth; therefore, it would benefit foster youth to establish a backup plan protocol to counter such incidents.

### **Practical Implications and Recommendations**

It is important to note that although entering foster care is primarily due to a family's inability to provide safety and basic developmental needs, prior learned behaviors negatively influence the decisions of foster youth. Participants who chose to take part in independent living programs continued to receive the necessary real-life, hands-on experiences that prepared them to transition from state-funded programs. Participants who left foster care because they had turned 18 and had the option to leave, described their feelings as fearful, nervous, bewildered, and actually scared to death. While these self-reported "terrified" youth made their decisions to leave care at 18, the majority of them figured out the necessary independent living skills firsthand, without help. These firsthand experiences often left them in difficult situations, emotionally, physically, and financially. Kevin, a 26 year old male, claimed,

I can get comfortable anywhere, I can sleep on anyone's couch, I can do whatever and I mean, my biggest problem for the past five years has being too complacent. It just was too easy without that push and motivation, then I woke up one day and I was, I want to be something in life, so I had to motivate and push myself.

Without supportive coaching, mentoring, counseling, and training, many foster youth live the same story as Kevin and they struggle to find that "push."

Foster youth struggle with the same barriers that all youth face when they consider the venture from home to independence. The significance for foster youth is the lack of adult role models in their lives to offer consistent guidance and support. If things do not work out for

foster youth, they lose their jobs, become ill and miss work, fall back on course work, they have no home to move back to until they can “get back on their feet.” A practical solution for foster youth would be an extension to the age requirement for leaving care, an extension of time for services, and continued contact and support in a mentoring capacity from social workers. The availability of a dependable adult, viable solutions, and a backup plan would allow foster youth an alternative to just finding “a couch to sleep on.”

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of this study concerned the careful selection of participants. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 26 and had, or in one case, were about to age out of foster care. A transcendental phenomenology was appropriate for this study as all participants shared the experience of the foster care system during their young adult transition years. While the majority of these participants entered care during middle or high school ages, a few had been involved with foster care their entire life. The research and probing questions did not render extensive or detailed background childhood information, which was another delimitation. As the focus for this study was on the aging out process, not what brought the participants into foster care, interview questions and focus group questions did not probe participants to share what brought them into foster care. While some participants willingly shared their detailed stories, others adhered to the questions related to leaving care, which was the goal of the study. The nature of working with this population was very sensitive; therefore, the questions were designed to direct attention specifically to the age out period.

Limitations for this study included no control for gender, marital status, parental status, or ethnicity of participants. This study also did not control the amount of time participants spent in the foster care system. Participants were selected from community colleges in rural areas;

therefore, limited exposure to resources such as public transportation and housing was available to participants, which limited participants' opportunities. In order to reach the minimum number of participants, five community colleges submitted IRB approvals and agreed to allow their students to participate in this study. Due to the vast areas of these communities, interviews were primarily conducted by phone, as were the focus groups, which limited the personal and visual evaluation factors.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research recommendations include additional qualitative studies in shared settings. Conducting a study of residential group home participants would provide insight to the programs and life skills established in that setting. Perhaps current programs need updates and revisions that implement a more hands-on experience in dealing with independent living matters such as financial literacy, cooking, cleaning, employment applications, rental agreements, and the importance of personal care and appearance. Continuing qualitative research that provides both foster youth and the caseworker's or house parent's perspective would also contribute to this field of study.

Additional research, such as case studies, from foster homes that would encompass the entire family unit, the foster child, and social worker(s) would benefit the field of education. The opinions of the foster parents, any biological children of the foster parent, the foster youth, and any biological siblings of the foster youth, as well as any other foster youth in the same home could provide valuable information for foster parent trainings and preparations. While a study such as this would be a challenge to a researcher, the beneficial insights would provide a valuable contribution to this field.

## Summary

Child protective service provisions have greatly advanced from the “orphan trains” of the early to mid-1800s; still, needed improvements are necessary to promote a productive age out experience for today’s foster youth. This study supported current data that emphasized the importance of a mentor, coach, counselor, foster parent, kinship provider, or other compassionate and caring adult who showed genuine concern for the social, emotional, and financial well-being and stability of the foster child. This study also diverged somewhat from current literature as to the success and importance of kinship placements. This qualitative study revealed three specific emerging themes—aspirations, emotions, and missing mentors—which were supported by current literature as well as the need for foster care system improvements especially for these three emerging themes.

A family’s dysfunction is not specific to a particular race, region of the country, or family size (single or two parent homes). While drug abuse and neglect were significant contributing factors, other elements also added to family stress. The 26-year-old male, Kevin, who was placed in a kinship home, was forced to leave that home at age 17 due to the guardian moving out of town. Kevin was not given the option to move with her, and when she decided to leave early, once again he had nowhere to go. Still, some foster care placements provided a very nurturing and stable atmosphere in which foster children thrived.

Not every foster family, group home, or kinship placement is perfect and neither is every nuclear family unit. The challenge for the foster care system, once they have taken charge of a child, is to find a home placement in which the child and family will thrive together. Flexibility is another component of finding the best placement solution for a child. It is never ideal to move a foster child from home to home; however, it could make all the difference for the child to find

a place to fit in and thrive. It is important that researchers continue to highlight problem areas that will contribute to the further development of stable solutions. Stable solutions for children and families include a supportive and available DSS agency. DSS agencies need to improve trainings, exit plans, and preparation of foster youth for independence. With persistence and dedication to improve the age out process, the foster care system will produce a better-prepared young adult who is ready to face the future with a positive, confident, and goal-oriented attitude.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB Approval Letter

### IRB Approval Letter from Liberty University

**From:** IRB, IRB

**Sent:** Tuesday, July 3, 2018 1:55 PM

**To:** Harrison, Janet P <jpharrison2@liberty.edu>

**Cc:** James, Christy M <cmjames2@liberty.edu>; IRB, IRB <IRB@liberty.edu>;  
EDUCDissertation, EDUCDissertation <EDUCDissertation@liberty.edu>

**Subject:** IRB Approval 3321.070318: Foster Youth Transitioning To Independent Living and Higher Education: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Janet Harrison,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.
  
7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Please retain this letter for your records. Also, if you are conducting research as part of the requirements for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, this approval letter should be included as an appendix to your completed thesis or dissertation.

Your IRB-approved, stamped consent form is also attached. This form should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without alteration.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**The Graduate School**

## APPENDIX B: Informed Consent Form

### CONSENT FORM

#### FOSTER YOUTH TRANSITIONING TO INDEPENDENT LIVING AND HIGHER EDUCATION: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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You are invited to be in a research study of the process of aging out of foster care including the preparations for independent living and higher education. You were selected as a possible participant because you are between the ages of 18 and 26, a current or former foster child, and are a current student or graduate student of a community college program. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Janet P. Harrison, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of foster youth who have aged out of foster care and enrolled in community college.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Participate in an interview session with goal-based tasks. Goal-based tasks will include participants' statement of where they see themselves and where they would like to be in three to five years. The second task will be to select a picture card from a variety of choices and caption the picture. This session will last approximately 45 minutes to one hour and will be audio recorded for accurate transcription.
2. Participate in a focus group with six to eight other study participants and share differences and similarities of the age out experience. This session should last no more than one and a half hours, and will also be audio recorded for accurate transcription.
3. Documentation from your intake application will be collected from your school's Great Expectations program office and used to identify and verify your eligibility to participate. Document information will be stored separate from the research documents to protect your confidentiality.

**Risks:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

**Benefits:** Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participating in this research.

Benefits to society include an in-depth analysis of the age out process from the unique perspective of participating foster youth, which may contribute valuable insights to current research of the age out process. Additionally, participants' perspectives may provide unique

ideas that serve to improve the transition from the foster care system to independent living and higher educational attainment.

**Compensation:** Participants will be compensated with a \$25 gift card for participating in this study. In order to receive the compensation, participants must complete all procedures of the study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group. However, due to the focus groups being conducted through a conference call and pseudonyms used for participants, confidentiality risks are minimal.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, Great Expectations, [REDACTED]

If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Janet P. Harrison. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [jharrison@patrickhenry.edu](mailto:jharrison@patrickhenry.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Christy James, at [cmjames2@liberty.edu](mailto:cmjames2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu). *Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Investigator

Date

## APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

### Interview Questions

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. Because I need a better understanding of your foster care experience, tell me about a typical day with your most recent foster family. Feel free to only share what you are comfortable sharing.
3. Tell me about your history with the foster care system.
4. What was your level of understanding of what it would be like living on your own prior to leaving foster care?
5. Tell me about what you were feeling just before you prepared to move from your final foster home.
6. What were your typical interactions like with your social worker or caseworker just before you turned 18?
7. How did these interactions compare with earlier visits or interactions?
8. Tell me about your preparation for independent living from your viewpoint. What did you think you would need to do to prepare yourself for independent living?
9. Tell me about the preparations for your independent living process by your foster family. How did your foster parents participate in this process?
10. Describe your first thoughts once you were on your own and no longer in your foster home.

11. Ideally, part of becoming an adult involves the process of examining and evaluating one's worldview (how you describe the world in which you live). Where are you in that process?
12. In what ways did the agency support you throughout the age out process?
13. Consider for a moment the best possible age out process. What would you suggest that could improve the transition to independent living for foster youth still living in care?

## **APPENDIX D: Focus Group Protocol**

### Focus Group Questions

1. Introduce yourself to the group, using only first names (pseudonyms will be assigned prior to transcription). Tell us how long you were in foster care and how long you have been living on your own.
2. Now, take a moment to reflect on your last year in foster care, from the time you turned 17, to just before your 18th birthday. Describe your dreams of independence and living on your own.
3. Think about when you were preparing to leave your final foster home placement for the last time. What thoughts were going through your mind concerning your immediate future?
4. Imagine that you are finished school and working full-time at a job that you like. Imagine that you just received a promotion on your job and you are feeling pretty good with yourself. What else would your life need at this point to make you truly happy?
5. If you could change anything about your age out process, what would it be and why?
6. What advice do you have for the 17-year-old version of you that we were talking about at the beginning of the group?

**APPENDIX E: Sample Interview Transcript**

1. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. Introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
  - a. Faith: Um, I am 22, I have a little boy and I'm married, I'm in community college right now for my second year. J: What are you studying? F: Um, I'm going to go into social work. J: Awesome, that's great.
2. Because I need a better understanding of your foster care experience, tell me about a typical day with your most recent foster family. Feel free to only share what you are comfortable sharing.
  - a. Faith: Ok, so the last family that I stayed with, foster family, they were just, it was a pretty normal, everybody was pretty normal, I would go to school, I would come home, really like a regular family within that home. J: Did you have other siblings in that home. F: Um, there was the foster mother had a daughter that lived there, I think she was like 30. There were no other foster kids. J: And two foster parents? F: No just one.
3. Tell me about your history with the foster care system. What I'm really looking for here is how many years and how many foster homes, that sort of thing.
  - a. Faith: Okay, so um, I went into foster care, I think I was 14, and I was eventually placed in a group home, and I stayed there for about six months, and then they moved me from a group home to another county to um, a foster home. And then I stayed there about six months and they moved me to another foster home and I was in that foster home until I aged out of the system.

4. What was your level of understanding of what it would be like living on your own prior to leaving foster care?
  - a. Faith: I had no idea, um, we would go in, I had a social worker that had us like fill out papers for independent living it would ask you questions like, do you know how to do your own laundry and stuff like that but as far as knowing what to do I had no idea what to do when I aged out.
5. Tell me about what you were feeling just before you prepared to move from your final foster home.
  - a. Faith: Terrified. J: You were scared. F: yes. J: You didn't know what to expect. F: No, I had absolutely no idea. J: Where did you go when you left your last foster home, were you on your own? F: Yes, my, well, he's my husband now, me and my boyfriend at the time moved into a little apartment, a one bedroom apartment. J: Right, were you in school at that time? F: I was, yes. J: Did you get some services, did they still help you through ETV funds or something like that? F: There was, I think it was called like, independent living or something like that.
6. What were your typical interactions like with your social worker or caseworker just before you turned 18?
  - a. Faith: UM, I don't really remember having any.
7. Ok, the next question is really going along with that, I wanted to know how they compared with earlier visits or interactions with your social worker. So, if you didn't remember any specific visits that you had right before you aged out, do you remember what it was like when your social worker came around? Or, how often did they come around?

- a. Faith: No, I mean, they never really came around that often, maybe once every six months I would see her. Where, the last foster home I stayed at, she, the foster mother told me she had come to visit that day, but I didn't really see them a lot. J: You were not there? F: Right. J: Ok.
8. Tell me about your preparation for independent living from your viewpoint. What did you think you would need to do to prepare yourself for independent living?
- a. Faith: I really, like, I had no idea. Um just to explain a little bit, in my last foster home, um, I turned 18, just a little bit after I turned 18, she just blindsided me, I came home one day from work and she told me I was going to have to move out. So, after that happened, I was literally just had to pack my stuff that night and I was completely homeless. So, when I had to go into independent living, I moved into a one bedroom apartment just figured it out on my own.
9. Tell me about the preparations for your independent living process by your foster family. How did your foster parents participate in this process? And basically what you just said, they didn't.
- a. Faith: Right, there was no, like I said, after I turned 18, I just came home one night and she said you gotta go. J: I'm really sorry about that. Different agencies in different areas have policies to follow and I've heard some other stories like that too, that's not good.
10. Describe your first thoughts once you were on your own and no longer in your foster home. What were you thinking about?
- a. Faith: Well, um, a little bit I was um, it was a little bit terrifying, because I didn't know how to pay bills, I didn't know how to do this or how to do anything on my

own, but on the other hand it was also like freedom, and I didn't have to deal with any of the stuff that came with foster care anymore, I was able to just do my thing just go to work, go to school not worry about any of the drama that came with foster families. J: Right, so you did have a job. F: Yes, I was working and going to school. J: So you were figuring it out, you didn't have any help, but you were figuring it out. F: Exactly.

11. Ideally, part of becoming an adult involves the process of examining and evaluating one's worldview (how you describe the world in which you live). Where are you in that process?

- a. Faith: I don't really know how to answer that. Um. J: Well, you said you are married, and you have a child, and you are in school, so you are in the process of figuring out how life works. I would say that you are pretty stable in that process just from my opinion and from listening to you describe your family and where you are at now in your life, does that seem accurate? F: Um, yeah, I mean, like I literally came from nothing and I didn't have any help trying to, I didn't have any help learning what I was supposed to do, and now I'm 22, we own a home, we own two vehicles, so I think I've figured it out. J: I think you're pretty far in that process, that's great.

12. In what ways did the agency support you throughout the age out process?

- a. Faith: Um, they provided a check every month. J: Right, for the independent living right? F: That's really the only thing that I could say that they did to help. I had to go into the social services building right after my husband and I signed the lease and we just had to explain to um that we were living together and I had to

leave the foster home that would be it. I just had to sign a couple papers and that was the last time we ever heard from them. J: Well, so once you got married they, the checks stopped, right? F: Yeah.

13. Consider for a moment the best possible age out process. What would you suggest that could improve the transition to independent living for foster youth still living in care?

- a. Faith: I think that more kids need to know that they can stay in independent living until they're 21. And I think that there should be more social workers that actually care enough to sit down and go like hey, do you know how to pay bills online, do you know where you need to go to buy groceries, do you know how to do this, do you know how to do that. Because when you're in a foster home, basically, in my experience, nobody cares if you're gonna be able to figure out what you do when you get out of that home. You're their problem for the moment but I just think there should be more instances where kids are taught what they need to do as adults rather. J: Sadly, you're not the only one who has told me that and I completely agree.

14. Tell me where you see yourself five years from now. What do you think will be going on? F: Um, five years from now I want to have my degree in social work, I want to be a social worker, and I want to be dealing with kids going through what I went through, kids that are in foster care and stuff like that. And my son will be nine, maybe more kids, I don't know but, definitely a degree, if nothing else, in five years. J: And you'll be working in your field by then, Thank you very much.