A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER STUDENTS LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

by

Tiffany Sue Beckwith

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Doctor of Education Degree

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

January 2023

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. Maslow's hierarchy of needs acted as the theory guiding this study, as it was essential when investigating how unmet needs for foster children affected their motivation to learn and feelings of belongingness with their school. This study was designed to answer the following central research question: What are the experiences of former foster students who have taken part in online education? Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, I collected the lived experiences of the participants to uncover emerging themes during online learning while in foster care. A sample of 10 former foster students who experienced online education while in foster care and graduated from high school during the academic years 2021 or 2022 resulted in a participant age range of 18-21 years old. To facilitate triangulation, data collection included surveys, interviews, writing prompt documents, and focus groups. Data analysis followed Moustakas' modification of the van Kaam method to horizontalize the data, cluster common experiences, and develop textural and structural descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon. The themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty for high school foster students engaged in online learning also included feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and post-graduation apprehension. Foster students learning online shared negative experiences including lack of supports, ease of cheating, non-engagement, and feelings of isolation. Foster students, due to their transient nature, need targeted educational supports put in place when learning online to succeed with coursework, become college/career ready, and to engage with peers forming a sense of connection with their school community.

Keywords: foster care, foster child, foster youth, online education, virtual learning

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to the unheard voices of children and adults that have experienced and are currently experiencing foster care. May their journey through an incredibly challenging time always be led by God. He sees their struggle, grief, and stressors and will provide for each and every one of their needs.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I thank God for holding me tight during the best and worst times of my life. He has a plan for me, and each of us, which we need to listen to. I would also like to acknowledge my two beautiful daughters, Lillian and Ruby, who have always inspired me to be the best mother I could be! Their understanding and patience as I spent many days, nights, and weekends diligently working on my courses and dissertation has meant the world to me. I would also like to thank my chair, committee, editor, and professors at Liberty. I felt supported and part of a team that reminded me daily about God's love for me, plan for me, and providence for myself and family.

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List of Abbreviations

Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA)

Advanced Placement (AP)

Aid to Dependent Children-Foster Care (ADC-FC)

Child Welfare Act of 1980 (CWA)

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Kids in Transition (KITS) intervention program

Social Emotional Learning (SEL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Children in foster care are one of the most underserved and vulnerable student populations in education (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). Children that are placed in foster care face significant challenges and difficulties which create barriers to success at school when compared to their non-foster care youth peers (Somers et al., 2020). Frequent school changes set foster students back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004) and increase academic knowledge gaps (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016). Placement unpredictability has been found to correlate with educational instability for students in foster care (Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018; Somers et al., 2020). In addition to the difficulties stemming from the transient nature of their placements, foster children have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools, which hampers academic success (Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019) and lessens a feeling of school belongingness consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. With the shift to online learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, research is beginning to uncover how online schools responded to the unique needs of foster children and their perceptions of virtual learning. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. This research gives a voice to the lived experiences of former foster students who have experienced online education and highlight their perceptions of supports and feelings of belongingness. This chapter is designed to provide background of the topic problem as well as historical context, social context, and theoretical context framing the problem of the study. The chapter continues with an explanation of the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, three main research questions, and definitions. This chapter closes with a summary.

Background

Interventions and proper care for children in the American foster care system have been guided by legislation in the United States. An understanding of how historical legal action has impacted the care of foster children brings awareness of educational supports put in place to provide a sense of security and consistency for this transient population. Transiency has shown to foundationally impact the social circumstances of foster children which appears in their difficulty trusting adults, feelings of cynicism, and disinterest in engaging with a new community and school district (Johnson et al., 2012; Palmieri & Salle, 2016). Exploring both Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory provide insight as to how foster children uniquely perceive their educational environment given their specific needs and difficulty forming connections due to their transient nature. This section will explore the historical, social, and theoretical background of the research problem with a focus on foster child feelings of belongingness and ability to form connections in an online educational environment.

Historical Context

Few longitudinal studies exist which follow foster children's development and multiple placements over long intervals of time (Kernan & Lansford, 2004). Tracking student educational outcomes over an extensive period of time is especially difficult due to the transient nature of children in foster care (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). However, legislative acts in the United States offer a review of how policy has changed over the year and shaped the current supports in place for foster children. Moving away from an emphasis on reunification (Kernan & Lansford, 2004; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014) and instead towards a best interest of the child approach, government legislation has slowly begun to prioritize the holistic and educational needs of the foster child (Phillips & Mann, 2013).

Beginning in the nineteenth century, child welfare became a public concern (Rymph, 2018). The establishment of the Children's Bureau in 1912 provided the beginning of federal oversight of children (Thomas, 2012). During the Great Depression, a need arose for federal funding to support foster children which continued through the postwar years resulting in continued foster child population grown (Rymph, 2018). Legislation supporting the needs of foster children began to take on more importance as the population continued to increase.

The passing of the 1961 Aid to Dependent Children-Foster Care (ADC-FC) amendment to the Social Security Act, granted money to states to oversee their own systems for child welfare allowing federal money for the first time to be directly used to support foster children (Phillips & Mann, 2013; Rymph, 2018; Thomas 2012). Shortly after, the Head Start education program, enacted in 1965, benefitted all preschool children in poverty (Smith, 2020) and was later reauthorized in 2007 to define foster children as a priority enrollment group (Jacobson, 2008). Then, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 created guidelines for neglect and child abuse (Phillips & Mann, 2013), providing more supports and protection for all children.

Legislation continued with the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (CWA) which brought structure to formalized case plans for children (Harris, 2011), guidelines for social workers (Phillips & Mann, 2013), and more focus on timely reunifications with the biological family to form permanent placements (Kernan & Lansford, 2004; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014). In the mid to late 1980's, children in foster care were experiencing more movement in foster care placements due to a back-and-forth situation with their biological placement. The Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 led to significant incarceration of women (Phillips & Mann, 2013) resulting in less biological caretakers at home and more children placed in foster care.

Continued growth of the foster children population, due in part to the Anti-Drug Acts of the 1980's and the limited policies set up by the federal government for children's welfare, necessitated focused legislation for foster children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) initiated a new era of legislation which put the child first and prioritized their safety above reunification efforts (Phillips & Mann, 2013). ASFA prioritized child safety, reduced time spent in foster care, and highlighted the positive permanency of adoptions (Kernan & Lansford, 2004), while also acknowledging reasonable reunifications for children in foster care. The reduction of time spent in foster care also functioned as a stabilizing opportunity for foster children, which limited educational moves and school transitions.

Following ASFA, the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (known as the Chafee Act) provided public funding and services for youth transitioning out of foster care (Shirk & Stangler, 2004) as well as required a data collection tool to be implemented to track independent living services for foster youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). In 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act was passed which granted federal financial support to states to implement transitional programs for foster youth until the age of 21 (Geiger & Okpych, 2021; Phillips & Mann, 2013). This addressed the concern that youth in foster care were aging out of the foster care system with few supports and lacking the potential benefit of permeance through placement (Font et al., 2018). The 2008 Act also focused on the education of youth in K-12 by putting into place policies leading to speedy school records transfer and limitation of school transfers for foster children (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019).

In 2014, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act added protection to youth in foster care, granted more rights to guardians, and required more data collection from the Fostering Connections Act (Jacobson, 2016). Shortly after, in 2015, the Elementary and

Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was amended by the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to ensure specific protections for foster children including a focus on school stability regarding transportation, collaboration with child welfare agencies, and mandatory reporting (ESSA, 2015). Most recently, the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 was passed. Because of the increasing number of children entering the foster care system this legislation directed federal money to rehabilitate the stability of families with a specific focus on homelessness, incarcerations, abuse, and neglect (Garcia, 2019).

Although legislation over the years has targeted the unique set of needs for foster children, key legislation specifically aimed at best placement and data tracking has impacted student success in school. Frequent school changes set foster students back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004) and increase academic knowledge gaps (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016) leading them to have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). During the COVID-10 pandemic, problems for foster children were heightened by the switch to online learning, an area which had not previously been researched for this vulnerable population. Although these changes led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty for many, for foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, a compounded situation unfolded (Blake et al., 2020). The impact of COVID-19 might prove to be longer lasting for students in foster care (Collins & Baldiga, 2020). By closing schools and effectively removing many of the key supports provided in-person during the school day, foster children lost an important connection leading to a variety of social problems combined with the already difficult feelings stemming from loss, abuse, and neglect.

Social Context

Much research is currently compiling about the effects of online learning for vulnerable

populations due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic felt across the world. Foster children are only one population of learners who experienced virtual education during the pandemic, but due to their specific needs and previous experiences, they represent a unique group who can share experiences, feelings, and perspectives on the implications and effects. Foster children are often placed in care outside of the biological parents/extended family members due to the experience of abuse or neglect (Font et al., 2018). Frequently the hope remains to reunite the child with his or her biological family (Blacquiere & Faasse, 2019); however, government institutions often need to find safe temporary and sometimes long-term foster placements (Harris, 2004; Kernan & Lansford, 2004; Sandh et al., 2020).

Continuity of school placement for foster children is a priority, but this transient population still may face school disruptions. Due to school changes, students in foster care have difficulty trusting adults, can feel cynical, and often are disinterested in starting over in a new community and school district (Johnson et al., 2012; Palmieri & Salle, 2016; Sandh et al., 2020). Research indicates that when foster children try to engage with their new placement environment, they are concerned with the stigma of being in foster care and formulate strategies to fit in with their peers (Johnson et al., 2012). It is important to understand what this stigma might look like in an online educational environment and how it impacts forming connections and feeling a sense of belongingness.

Although virtual schools have existed for many years and have educated students from various backgrounds and experiences, online learning for students in foster care in large numbers was only recently brought to attention in the research due to the pandemic. The educational change to online learning led to feelings of loneliness for many, but due to past experiences of insecurity, mistreatment, and trauma, foster children suffered an amplified effect (Blake et al.,

2020). Their specific needs coupled with a shift to online learning is valuable to research and could offer proposed solutions and supports to help other vulnerable populations when learning online.

Theoretical Context

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment offer practical views to understand how foster children form connections and guide the context of this research problem. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a comprehensive categorical framework which illustrates the relationship of individual needs to motivational aspirations. The hierarchy distinguishes five categories of needs with the base and most foundational level being that of physiological needs. Building upon met physiological needs, an individual looks to satisfy their safety needs (second level) followed by the third level which focuses on belongingness needs, also referred to as love needs. Esteem needs including self-worth and feelings of accomplishment occupy the fourth level leading to the final and fifth level of self-actualization. The hierarchy is essential when investigating how unmet needs for foster children affect their motivation to learn and feelings of belongingness with their school. Failing to have these more basic needs fulfilled can lead to deprivation and the inability to feel a sense of satisfaction and belonging (Maslow, 1943).

Although there has been much concentrated research on the problems encountered by foster children, a shift towards focusing on their needs advances opportunities to employ productive supports (Steenbakkers et al., 2018b). Children in foster care share a common set of needs including placement stability, general safety, and essentials such as food and shelter (Bucchio et al., 2020). Using the theoretical framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to support foster children, a closer look at the lower levels of physiological and safety needs

indicates that they must be adequately met before a sense of belongingness is achieved (Maslow, 1943). Through the collected voices of the former foster student participants, the impacts of stability as a predictor of success (Shirk & Stangler, 2004), feelings of instability and inconsistency in the educational environment (Jones & Dean, 2020), and educational instability correlated with placement unpredictability (Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018; Somers et al., 2020) will be validated.

Love and belongingness needs for children in foster care are challenging to meet due to lack of trust in the new placement (Blackquiere & Faasse, 2019) and separations (Bucchio, 2020). Feelings of distance and disconnection with peers is commonly felt by foster children (Jones & Dean, 2020). It is interesting to explore how these feelings will relate to online learning platforms for students in foster care since academic success for foster children is correlated with school connectedness (Somers et al., 2019). Examining the lived experiences of former foster students who have experienced online education will help add to the research on how belongingness needs may or may not present through virtual classrooms. It is anticipated that the data collected through this study will help to uncover what supports through online education are beneficial and how these schools can improve to meet the specific needs of foster youth.

Feelings of distance and separation can also be viewed through the lens of attachment theory. Attachment theory can support the relationship dynamics between people and is relevant to the attachment and connection of students in foster care to their peers, care takers, and educators. Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory research helped to understand the distress and effects children suffer when separated from their mothers (or primary caregivers). Bowlby studied early bonds that children formed with their caregiver and their resulting behaviors. Studying how children reacted (behaved) when frighted and children then needing comfort and

care, Bowlby found that attachment was evolutionary and not behavioral (learned). When one is close to their caregiver, they feel safety and comfort. Attachment theory helps to understand the correlation between how an infant's loss of a mother (in the short term) can affect later personality characteristics and relationships (Wilson-Ali et al., 2019).

Other factors such as how children in foster care do or do not reattach, previous maltreatment, the effects of separation, the timing of separation, disruptions with multiple caregivers, and especially the contributions given by foster parents could all have an impact on attachment for foster children (Stovall & Dozier, 1998). Foster children suffer loss due to the removal from their biological parents (Font et al., 2018) which can impact a sense of security and impact future behaviors and relationships (Fawley-King et al., 2016). It is of interest to explore how the positive and negative attachments to the biological parent could impact foster children later in life and how this might affect their future behaviors and abilities to form attachments. The impact could be seen in the inability to form connections, make friends, trust foster families, and feel a sense of motivation (Wilson-Ali et al., 2019). Researching the lives of former foster students who have experienced online education will help to add to Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory research through detailed accounts of feelings of connection, belongingness, and implications of previous separations. It is anticipated that the data collected through this study will help to uncover what supports through online education help students be successful and form meaningful attachments with peers and teachers (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019; Somers et al., 2019) as well as how online schools can improve to meet the specific needs of foster youth.

Problem Statement

The problem is that children in foster care encounter learning delays and knowledge gaps due to their transient nature which impact academic success (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016; Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Although geographical

moves are tracked (ESSA, 2015), foster children are not given mandatory and immediate learning supports such as a child with an IEP or 504 Plan would receive. Due to moving schools and neighborhoods, children in foster care experience instability (Sandh et al., 2020) and learning gaps (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016) which set them back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). In addition to the difficulties stemming from the transient nature of their placements, foster children also have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools, which in turn hampers academic success (Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Instead of a deficiency focus, a shift towards emphasizing their needs advances opportunities to employ productive supports (Steenbakkers et al., 2018b) since children in foster care share a common set of needs (Bucchio et al., 2020).

Limited research (mainly related to the COVID-19 pandemic) has shown that virtual learning environments may perpetuate the learning loss (Middleton, 2020) and equity implications can lead to disparities (Haderlein et al., 2021). Closing schools and effectively removing some of the key supports provided in-person during the school day, foster children lost a connection. Although these changes led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty for many, for foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, a compounded situation unfolded (Blake et al., 2020). The gap in the literature presents an opportunity in research to discover what online schools are doing to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. This study examined what sort of educational supports specific to the foster child population existed in online learning environments by way of collecting the voices of former foster students who participated in online

education during high school for a period of time specified as at least nine academic months concurrently or non-consecutively during the grades of 9-12. The potential supports for foster children included educational programs, policies, and procedures specifically in place for students in foster care.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the knowledge base of lived experiences of former foster students, a voice that is not prominent in the current research. Resulting data informs in-person and virtual educators, administrators, and other school officials as to the concern for and special needs of students in foster care. This study contributes to the literature from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective as explained below.

The theoretical significance of this study uncovers how the needs of foster students align with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and how the hierarchy impacts feeling of belongingness in the online school setting. When children are living in challenging situations such as poverty, meeting basic physiological needs is difficult (Noltemeyer et al., 2020) and causes an inability to focus on meeting higher educationally related needs such as Maslow's (1943) belongingness level. The lived experiences of the participants bring a voice to a vulnerable population which faces challenges coupled with a common set of unique needs relating specifically to their placement instability (Bucchio et al., 2020). Using the theoretical framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to support foster children, this study adds to the research investigating how to best support foster students learning and obtaining a sense of belongingness in their online school.

The empirical significance of this study adds to the literature of phenomenological research by giving a voice to former foster students with a specific focus on online educational experiences. Due to a gap in the literature, it is important to acknowledge and research the

impact of online education for this specific population. The transcendental phenomenological research approach used in this study collected the lived experiences of a heterogeneous group by way of surveys, in depth and descriptive interview questions, focus groups, and writing prompts to explore the phenomenon and report emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Other phenomenology studies rich with descriptive interview responses such as Jones and Dean (2020) allow former foster students to reflect on their previous experiences and share their perspectives. This study adds additional former foster student voices to the literature. Although many studies focus on transition experiences and post-secondary education, this study presents unique findings specific to online education perspectives of former foster students.

The practical significance of the study empowers change in educational entities and specifically informs online teachers and school administrators of the unique needs of foster students as well as provide helpful supports which enhance a feeling of belongingness and safety in online schools consistent with meeting needs in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. How instruction can be delivered in the classroom with specific needs of foster students considered as well as how to engage students in foster care in the virtual classroom is helpful knowledge for teachers, and resulting policies, procedures, and program implementation stemming from the data, are important for online school administrators. Understanding the unique experiences of foster students in online educational environments sheds light on how faculty, school counselors, and administrators can acknowledge specific needs and guide supports to meet the needs. Lastly, how educators and administration should work in tandem with foster parents to provide a safe online environment and support educational goals offer practical support which benefits foster students in online schools holistically.

Research Questions

To understand the lived experiences of former foster students who have experienced online education, the following central research question and sub-questions guided this study which are also found in Appendix B:

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of former foster students who have spent time learning through online educational platforms/schools?

Sub-Question One

How do students who have experienced foster care form connections with peers and adults through online learning?

Sub-Question Two

How do students who have experienced foster care perceive online learning environments (positively, negatively, and/or comparatively with their personal brick and mortar experience)?

Sub-Question Three

How do former foster students feel that online education prepared them for post high school graduation?

Definitions

1. *Former foster child/ Former foster youth* – A child or youth who has spent time in foster care and either been returned to their biological family, adopted, or aged out of the child welfare system (at age 18 or 21 depending on the specific state) (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).

2. *Foster care* - A temporary living arrangement to secure the welfare and safety of a child until a permanent home placement can be established or re-established (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).
3. *Foster child* - A child that the state child welfare system has placed in an out-of-biological home setting, such as a foster home, due to abuse, neglect, or other reason (including death of a parent). The child may remain in care until age 18, or up to age 21 in some states. Time spent in the foster care will vary per the family situation. (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019).
4. *Individualized Education Plan (IEP)* - A written plan providing specific services for a student with a disability who meets criteria set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. The student must also require specially designed instruction in order to receive educational supports (*Sec. 300.320*, 2017).
5. *Social Emotional Learning (SEL)* – Social Emotional Learning refers to a process to help students and adults develop skills to manage relationships, emotions, and personal identity (CASEL, 2007).

Summary

Children in foster care are one of the most underserved and vulnerable student populations in education (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). They are a transient population prone to accruing learning gaps due to school moves (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016) which set them back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). In addition, children in foster care also have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools, which hampers academic success (Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online

educational environments. This research gives a voice to the lived experiences of former foster students who have experienced online education and highlights their perceptions of supports and feelings of belongingness consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs.

Notable, limited research has shown that virtual learning environments may perpetuate learning loss (Middleton, 2020) and equity implications can lead to disparities (Haderlein et al., 2021). Closing schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and effectively removing some of the key supports provided in-person during the school day, resulted in basic needs of foster children not being met. Although these changes led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty for many, for foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, a compounded situation unfolded (Blake et al., 2020). The gap in the literature presented an opportunity in research to discover what online cyber schools are doing to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

Most importantly, this study is significant because it uncovered how negative learning experiences of foster children impacted feelings of belongingness and connection in online learning environments. It adds to the research by providing rich descriptions of personal experiences of former foster children who have spent time learning online and their perceptions of academic supports (positive and negative) in online educational environments. With the shift to online learning resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, research is beginning to uncover how online schools responded to the unique needs of foster children and how virtual learning is perceived by this specific population.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A review of the existing literature was conducted to study educational supports specifically available to students in foster care and how online learning can present specific challenges for this vulnerable population. This chapter will convey a review of the current literature related to the focus of study. In the first section, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs will be discussed relevant to the needs of children in foster care, with an emphasis on belongingness needs. The second section begins with a synthesis of recent literature regarding factors characterizing foster placement along with current statistics, a historical perspective of legal supports, and educational experiences of children in foster care with special regard to foster children's transition to college and adulthood. The literature review continues with a discussion of existing educational supports resulting in stability for foster children, the impact of online learning for foster students, and the need for further educational supports to be put in place. Lastly, a gap in the literature is demonstrated, highlighting a practical need for this specific study.

Theoretical Framework

Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a comprehensive categorical framework which illustrates the relationship of individual needs to motivational aspirations. The hierarchy is essential when investigating how unmet needs for foster children affect their motivation to learn and feeling of belongingness with their school. This literature review examines how the needs of foster children correspond to the various levels within Maslow's hierarchy of needs and the way their met and unmet needs affect their learning processes and motivation to learn. Although there has been much research focusing on the problems encountered by foster children, a shift towards

focusing on their needs offers opportunities to implement productive supports (Steenbakkers et al., 2018b).

Importantly, the hierarchy distinguishes five categories of needs with the base and most foundational level being that of physiological needs (Maslow, 1943). This category encompasses the most basic of needs including food, water, and clothing (Crandall et al., 2019). Once physiological needs are met, an individual looks to satisfy their safety needs (Maslow, 1943). Safety needs include feeling a sense of protection and having boundaries (Crandall et al., 2019) as well as financial security and job stability. For younger children, safety needs include a continuation of routine without disruption which produces predictability and order (Maslow, 1943). When conceptualizing safety needs, a preference for familiarity instead of the unknown brings a sense of security. However, if safety needs remain unmet, it is unlikely that an individual would be motivated and work towards meeting higher level needs including belongingness (Celestine, 2021).

Furthermore, the third and likewise middle level of the hierarchy, includes belongingness needs, which Maslow (1943) refers to as love needs. Forming friendships, close acquaintances, and finding a place in a group all help to solidify and meet love and belongingness needs (Crandall et al., 2019). Showing and giving love to others also demonstrates met belongingness needs. Belongingness can be evidenced in religious affiliations, commitments to club membership, and feeling a part of a friend group. The fourth level of the hierarchy, which marks the final level of deprivation needs, focuses on esteem needs. Failing to have these needs fulfilled can lead to deprivation and the inability to feel a sense of satisfaction and belonging (Maslow, 1943). Individuals aspire to have high regard for themselves through self-evaluation,

which can present as feelings of self-resect, positive self-esteem and demonstration of competency at the esteem level.

Finally, when needs in the lower four levels in the hierarchy are met, one enters the realm of self-actualization which can be exemplified by self-fulfillment; becoming everything that one is able to be (Maslow, 1943). At the top of the hierarchy, the idea of deprivation is no longer considered because behavior is not motivated by an absence, instead development of self becomes the motivator for the individual to self-actualize (Schunk, 2020). It is important when reviewing the hierarchy of needs to remember that needs unmet in one category constrain future possibilities in higher levels (Maslow, 1943; Steenbakkers et al., 2018b). Moving through the levels of the hierarchy represents the optimal path.

Notably, Maslow's (1943) hierarchy will shape this study with a focus on the needs of foster children and their ability to obtain a sense of belongingness in the online school setting. When children are living in challenging situations such as poverty, meeting basic physiological needs is difficult (Noltemeyer et al., 2020) and causes an inability to focus on meeting higher educationally related needs including feelings of belongingness and connection to school and community. The study's research questions have been developed to respond to perceptions of needs and their impact on educational experiences online for former foster students. Data analysis of the interviews, focus groups, and writing prompt data analysis will be synthesized to create a "unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Maslow's (1943) hierarchy will shape the findings and reported results through themes of belongingness and connections existing and missing during online educational experiences. Adding to the current literature featuring the voices of foster children

using Maslow's hierarchy as a framework, this study uniquely correlated the needs of these students in an online learning environment.

Related Literature

In addition to correlating Maslow's (1943) hierarchy to the unique needs of foster children, significant literature and research regarding foster children and educational outcomes was worthy of review. Literature related to implications of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, factors characterizing foster placement including the effect of trauma on this vulnerable population, a historical perspective of enacted legislation and legal supports, and educational experiences of children in foster care, with special regard to foster children transition to college and adulthood is discussed. The literature review continues with a discussion of existing educational supports resulting in stability for foster children, the role of the supportive foster parent, the impact of online learning for foster students, and the need for further educational supports to be put in place.

Implication of Hierarchy of needs for Foster Children

Notably, one in five children in the United States is currently experiencing poverty, which makes meeting basic physiological needs of the child difficult (Noltemeyer et al., 2020) and subsequently can lead to inability to focus on meeting higher educationally related needs such as Maslow's (1943) belongingness level. Foster children are particularly different from their peers in the way that their needs are satisfied coupled with the prohibitive difficulties they face (Steenbakkers et al., 2018b). Children in foster care share a common set of needs relating specifically to their placement stability, safety, and basic needs including food and shelter (Bucchio et al., 2020) which is understandable given their unique situation of being removed from the biological home and placed in one or more foster homes. Referencing the theoretical

framework of Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs to support foster children, a closer look at the lower levels of physiological and safety needs indicated that the needs must be adequately met before a sense of belongingness is achieved.

Additionally, for youth in foster care to reach their greatest educational potential, they need to obtain a feeling of safety and have their basic needs met. Conceptual support indicates that children who are lacking basic needs due to poverty conditions may exhibit greater educational success when supports are put in place to meet their housing, food, health, belonging, and esteem needs (Noltemeyer et al., 2020). Similarly important, the need for help, which can be seen as a mechanism to cope, grow, and develop, researchers have found to be prioritized by foster children over the need for independence (Steenbakkers et al., 2018a). Being able to rely upon an adult for met basic needs which will offer them stability is important to children who have faced separation and disappointment. Reliance upon others, such as secure foster parents, also affirm safety needs.

When contemplating basic physiological needs, it is important to keep in mind that foster children, characterized as a transient population, face a variety of disadvantages and previous trauma and/or neglect which leads to a feeling of instability. Some biological parents are unable to meet basic needs, leading to their children being removed from the home due to neglect (Bucchio, 2020). Removal can also occur due to abuse in the biological home, crisis situations, or other unsafe conditions. When in a stable foster placement, basic needs including food, water, clothing and the like are often immediately met; however, safety needs, including a feeling of permanency, might take longer to develop. Stability is a solid predictor of success (Shirk & Stangler, 2004) and can be evidenced in stability of home environment and school consistency. Researchers have found that because of being placed in foster care, children have feelings of

instability and inconsistency (Jones & Dean, 2020). Placement unpredictability has been found to correlate with educational instability for children in foster care (Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018; Somers et al., 2020). Because of their transient nature and lack of placement stability, foster children take a longer amount of time to adjust to their surroundings and have their safety needs met, but when they feel safe in their placement (Blackquiere & Faasse, 2019), free of abuse, they begin to form bonds (Steenbakkers et al., 2018a).

Furthermore, love and belongingness needs for children in foster care can be challenging to meet due to past experiences of instability in the biological home, lack of trust with care takers, (Blackquiere & Faasse, 2019), and also due to family separations (Bucchio, 2020). The voice of a former child regarding instability felt in foster care shares, “as a child I was passed from one foster family to another…At no time in my life have I ever been able to move to the ‘love and belonging’ stage” (Dewey, 2017, p. 43). Feelings of physical and social distance as well as emotional disconnect with peers is commonly referenced by children in foster care (Jones & Dean, 2020). A positive step towards meeting needs of belongingness for foster children is demonstrated and evidenced when they develop feelings of connection to their school. Researchers have found that academic success for foster children is correlated with school connectedness (Somers et al., 2019).

Additionally, school transitions compound the difficulty of belongingness needs being met, since foster children who are placed in a new neighborhood must often register at a new school and form new relationships (Fawley-King et al., 2016). An appropriate school placement plays a pivotal role in feelings of connection and belongingness as research indicates that foster children’s future successful learning engagement and school connectedness are positively associated (Somers et al., 2020). However, research also indicates that students in foster care are

lacking the direct finances or use of finances by their foster parent to be involved in extracurricular activities within and outside of school including sports, private lessons, and social clubs, which can constrict their ability to form social connections (Shirk & Stangler, 2004). Foster children have been uniquely abandoned by the adults meant to care for them, leaving them vulnerable and powerless without a choice of where they may go and who they can trust (Zoloth, 2012), thus extracurricular and social engagement opportunities often do not take priority, but are none the less important. Feelings of abandonment can hamper the ability to form bonds and create relationships necessary to meet Maslow's (1943) belongingness needs. Movement to and involvement in a new school can present a variety of obstacles for foster youth, which may necessitate specific school provided supports.

For the purposes of continued correlation of foster student's need with the hierarchy, Maslow's esteem needs include the development of feelings of achievement, self-confidence, and self-respect (Bucchio, 2020; Maslow, 1943). Esteem needs within Maslow's (1943) hierarchy can also present for children in foster care as a need for independence (Steenbakkers et al., 2018b). Independence is evidenced in the drive some youth in foster care display through their desire to move on to college and/or career readiness programs, which can solidify as early as the middle school years (Jones & Dean, 2020). However, lacking supports for an underserved population of foster children, creates opportunity gaps which grow larger as the foster child rises through the grades which in turn greatly reduces the likelihood that foster children will graduate ready for college (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019) and/or matriculate to a college or university program of study.

For foster children, as is similar for all children, the final stage of self-actualization in Maslow's hierarchy manifests as an individual fulfilling their potential (Bucchio, 2020) to be all

that they can be (Maslow, 1943). Although the research is lacking for children in foster care, as to how one would achieve this level, it is important to consider how uniquely one might self-actualize, such as in sports, creation of art, extracurricular activities, or in the classroom (McLeod, 2020). Findings indicate that some foster children prioritize self-actualization needs in the way that they focus on the future (Steenbakkers et al., 2018a) which can be evidenced in how they are driven to succeed through their interest and focus on higher educational opportunities or career training programs. Through the framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, concern becomes evident regarding the unmet needs of children in foster care. This is illustrated by the lacking supports to meet their needs in the lower hierarchy levels, hindering motivation and ability to move to the higher levels which facilitate learning, belongingness, and self-actualization.

Factors Characterizing Foster Placement

When biological parents and extended family are unable to care for a child which is commonly due to neglect or abuse (Font et al., 2018), the child becomes reliant upon the compassion and kindness of community members who take the initiative to become foster parents (Harris, 2004). As compared to permanent placement adoption, foster care is based on temporary (Font et al., 2018; Harris, 2011; Kernan & Lansford, 2004) economic relationships contractually put in place often with strangers instead of family members to facilitate a safe home for foster children (Zoloth, 2012). Frequently the hope remains to reunite the foster child with his or her biological family (Blacquiere & Faasse, 2019); however, at times it is necessary for government institutions to step in and find temporary as well as long-term safe foster placements (when needed) to ensure the safety of the child (Harris, 2004; Kernan & Lansford, 2004).

Interestingly, it is the government agency that acts as both the vehicle of foster children's abandonment and the sole source of their protection (Zoloth, 2012). Creating significant instability and impermanence, many children move from one foster home to another without ever feeling part of a permanent family (Harris, 2004). Vulnerability for children in foster care stems from a feeling of powerlessness and the lack of meaningful choice or say in their housing arrangements (Zoloth, 2012). Experiences of abuse and neglect often stunt normal development of self-worth (Moody, 2018). The impact of frequent moves, feelings of instability, and lack of sense of agency can prevent children in foster care from having their safety and belongingness needs met.

Impact of Trauma on Foster Children

Exposure to traumatic events has been shown to impact brain development (Bick & Nelson, 2016; Rauktis, 2022) which is tremendously important because children who have experienced foster care are more likely to experience negative life events leading to trauma (Cusimano, et al., 2021). Few studies examine brain development specifically in foster children; however, one such study reported that there were neurodevelopmental differences between foster children (who had been maltreated and removed from their biological family) as compared to their non-foster peers which impact alterations in areas of the brain that support higher-level cognition (Bruce et al., 2013). This deficit could affect daily functioning as well as social and academic situations.

In addition to the impact on brain development (Bick & Nelson, 2016; Rauktis, 2022), exposure to traumas can lead to a variety of problems for youth in foster care, such as emotional and social issues (Steenbakkers, 2019). Along with trauma exposure, time spent in foster care is associated with poorer sustained attention, higher frequency of traumatic brain injury, and

adverse childhood experiences (Cusimano et al., 2021). Foster students who have been exposed to traumatic events, which is often the case when removal from a biological home is necessary, can also have resulting learning impacts due to the trauma and brain development impacts. In higher education, former foster students lag behind their peers in academic achievement as specifically seen in the correlation between increased exposure to trauma and negative educational outcomes such as withdrawing from courses due to level of content difficulty or feelings of overwhelm during the semester (Bishop et al., 2019). Often, foster youth deal with the impact of trauma through avoidance; however, they may also proactively search for stability and growth (Steenbakkers, 2019).

Notably, health of children in foster care in comparison to their general population peers indicates poor levels of both physical and mental health which is often attributed to their early life situations and circumstances (Turney & Wildeman, 2016). Foster children are also more likely to experience significant family situations including death of a parent, separation or divorce of parents, abuse by parents, incarceration of parents, mental illness of a family member, and drug abuse within the household (Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Research supports that children in foster care are disproportionately exposed to a variety of adverse childhood experiences which can impact later adult health and wellbeing issues due to the experience of foster care. (Leve et al., 2012; Turney & Wildeman, 2017). Being cognizant of existing physical and mental health concerns, and how the issues might worsen while in foster care, health care practitioners can help to improve the situation by performing timely evaluations and focusing on continuity of care (Simms & Szilagyi, 2000).

Foster Population Statistical Evidence

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reported 424,000 children in foster care as of September 30, 2019, with constant growth shown each year between 2011 and 2017 *(Trends in foster care & adoption,* 2019*)*. In 2019, 46% of all children in foster care were placed with a non-relative (*AFCARS Report #27*, 2020). Each child in foster care has a case plan goal which correlates to the future trajectory for the child regarding housing and care and will eventually help the transition planning (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). In 2019, 55% of the foster children had a goal to reunify with their parent or primary caregiver, and closely related, 47% of children discharged were reunified with a parent or primary caregiver (*AFCARS Report #27*, 2020). Sadly, some children in foster care do not have plans for permanent family housing, such as 2% in 2019 that planned to stay in long term foster care and 4% which planned to emancipate.

In addition to the previous population growth and goal statistics, circumstances for placement into foster care vary; however, the main cause for removal of children that entered the United States foster care system in 2019 was neglect (63%) (*AFCARS Report #27*, 2020). In addition to cause for removal, other statistical data including diversity of the foster child population is reported. Although children of color are seen largely in the 21% Hispanic, and 23% Black categories, the majority of children in foster care in 2019 was reported as White (44%). Tracking the demographic information of the foster population is important especially as research continues to note that specific categories, including males and those of an ethnic minority show an increase in poor educational outcomes (O'Higgins et al., 2017).

Furthermore, time spent in foster care can vary greatly. The average time spend in foster care in 2019 was 19.6 months, but 14% of children spent 3 or more years (*AFCARS Report #27*, 2020). Beginning with the passing of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) a

focus on the reduction of time spent in foster care has been prioritized (Kernan & Lansford, 2004). The reduction of time spent in foster care can function as a stabilizing opportunity for foster children, which helps to limit educational moves and school transitions while also providing safe care or focusing on appropriate reunification efforts. Statistical evidence supports the diversity of the foster child population, past population growth, and continued existence as a vulnerable population (*Trends in foster care & adoption,* 2019). With numerous children in foster care (currently in school as well as readying to enter school), public educational institutions offer a unique opportunity to standardize supports for foster children.

Historical Legal Perspective on Foster Children

Focusing less on developmental theory and driven more by policy, researchers have aggregated children in foster care by age and time spent in care because few longitudinal studies exist which track foster children's development and multiple placements over long intervals of time (Kernan & Lansford, 2004). Tracking student outcomes longitudinally is especially difficult due to the transient nature of children in foster care (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). To address the gap in the research regarding educational supports in place for foster children, it is important to review positive and negative legislation mandated by the federal government to acknowledge foster children and prioritize their needs.

In addition, researchers have analyzed past changing legislation regarding placement for foster children to uncover lacking supports and discover what is perceived as being best for children. Child welfare became a public concern during the nineteenth century in the United States as local legislation was enacted to protect children (Rymph, 2018). Federal oversight of children commenced with the formation of the Children's Bureau in 1912 which defined their specific age-related needs and ways that policy could be supportive (Thomas, 2012). The bureau

acted in more of an exploratory way in a consultant role without much authority, which resulted in the bureau issuing policy recommendations. Then, at the time of the Great Depression, a critical need arose for federal funding to support foster children, which was difficult to standardize because states continued to receive only indirect support from the federal government (Rymph, 2018). Foster children in the postwar years became labeled as damaged since the New Deal programs had helped families stay intact economically, which resulted in a question as to why the foster children population continued to grow, doubling in number from 1933 to 1965. Legislative change was necessary.

Notably, the passing of the 1961 Aid to Dependent Children-Foster Care (ADC-FC) amendment to the Social Security Act granted money to states to oversee their own systems for child welfare allowing federal money for the first time to be directly used to support foster children (Phillips & Mann, 2013; Rymph, 2018; Thomas 2012). However, the ADC-FC amendment drew the focus away from voluntary placements of children into foster situations, because only court committed foster care was financially incentivized, leading to more frequent determinations of neglect. With the creation of the Head Start education program in 1965 to benefit preschool children in poverty (Smith, 2020) which was later reauthorized in 2007 to note foster children as a priority enrollment group (Jacobson, 2008) and the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 to create guidelines for neglect and child abuse (Phillips & Mann, 2013), all children, including foster children were given more supports and protection.

Likewise, foster care legislation in the form of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (CWA) brought structure to formalized case plans for children (Harris, 2011), guidelines for social workers (Phillips & Mann, 2013), and more focus on timely reunifications with the biological family to form permanent placements (Kernan & Lansford,

2004; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014). With a focus on reunification and parent's rights, came the problem of foster children bouncing back and forth between their biological family and foster homes when the biological family was not stable, often being coined a "revolving door" by researchers (Phillips & Mann, 2013, p. 864). Awareness of "foster care drift," noted by researchers meaning children moving from foster home to foster home and languishing inside the foster care system, also was brought to the forefront when permanency of placement became an important legislative goal (Rymph, 2017, p. 159; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014, p. 115). Discrepancies between policies which resulted in frequent movements between foster placement to biological placement and policies which resulted in foster children moving from foster home to foster home resulted in inconsistency and instability.

Regarding reunification, researchers have found that more adjustment difficulties for foster children stem from reunification with the biological parents which suggests that a focus on permanency is in the best interest of the child yet may not be permanency achieved through placement in the biological home (Kernan & Lansford, 2004). With permanency of a safe placement established for foster children, physiological and safety needs as defined in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy are typically met. Limited research also indicates that reuniting foster children with their biological families correlates with negative outcomes including being less likely to graduate high school or enroll in post-secondary program, whereas adopted youth were most likely to graduate and enroll (Font et al., 2018). Compounding the revolving door effect, which limits the stability of children in foster care placements due to movement back and forth with their biological placement (Phillips & Mann, 2013), and the concern for foster care drift (Rymph, 2017; Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014), the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 led to a significant incarceration of women. Many of the women were mothers with drug and substance

abuse problems (Phillips & Mann, 2013) who were the predominate caretaker in the household. Their imprisonment left many young children uncared for thus increasing the population of foster children during the late 1980's and early 1990's.

Continued growth of the foster children population, due in part to the Anti-Drug Acts of the late 1980's (Phillips & Mann, 2013) and the limited policies set up by the federal government of establishing minimal infrastructure and entrusting responsibility to the states to enact policy for children's welfare, necessitated focused legislation for foster children. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) initiated a new era of legislation which put the child's needs first (above reunification) in an effort to enhance their safety (Phillips & Mann, 2013) giving hope for improvement in their lives (Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014). Instead of focusing on reunification with the biological parent, a primary focus of ASFA was to increase adoptions (Kernan & Lansford, 2004) controversially by way of financial incentives (Whitt-Woosley & Sprang, 2014).

One year prior to the ASFA, foster children were spending an average of three years in the foster care system, which was seen as a failure on the part of the U.S. government to find permanence and stability for foster children (Phillips & Mann, 2013). Although reasonable efforts would continue for reunification, ASFA was primarily concerned with child safety and reduction of time spent in foster care (Kernan & Lansford, 2004) which would be measured through state accountability of performance standards (Phillips & Mann, 2013). The reduction of time spent in foster care also functioned as a stabilizing opportunity for foster children, which limited educational moves and school transitions.

Following ASFA, minimal legislation regarding foster children followed. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (known as the Chafee Act) provided public funding and services

for youth transitioning out of foster care (Shirk & Stangler, 2004) as well as required a data collection tool to be implemented to track independent living services for foster youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). This data collection tool, known as the National Youth in Transition Database, was later created in 2010 by the Children's Bureau (2021) and continues to track information including race, ethnicity, date of birth, sex, and foster care status of youth in foster care. Outcomes, such as employment status, experiences with homelessness, incarceration, and enrollment in an educational program for former foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system are also collected (Children's Bureau, 2021).

Noting that youth in foster care were unfortunately aging out of the foster care system with few supports and lacking the potential benefit of permeance through placement (Font et al., 2018), the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 was passed which granted federal financial support to states to in turn implement transitional programs (including educational and health care related) for foster youth until the age of 21 (Geiger & Okpych, 2021; Phillips & Mann, 2013). The Act also focused on the education of youth in K-12 by putting into place policies leading to speedy school records transfer and limitation of school transfers (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Lastly, the Act promoted permanency for foster children through an increased effort to place the children in kinship care, such as with a relative. Recent research surveying representatives of 15 different states about features of the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act reveal that more oversight and support of the states by the federal government is necessary to successfully implement all parts of the policy, especially regarding integration of kinship care (Koh et al., 2021).

Moving forward, in 2014, the Preventing Sex Trafficking and Strengthening Families Act added protection to youth in foster care, granted more rights to guardians, and required more data

collection from the Fostering Connections Act to demonstrate financial accountability regarding services implemented to prevent foster placement (Jacobson, 2016). Focusing on making life for youth in foster care more normalized, the Act also focused on their needs, especially stability, as found in the lower levels of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. Shortly after, in 2015, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was amended by the passing of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to ensure specific protections for foster children including a focus on school stability with regard to transportation, collaboration with child welfare agencies, and mandatory reporting (ESSA, 2015). Most recently, in 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act was passed to address the increasing number of children entering the foster care system by way of federal dollars being directed towards parents to address stability needs including homelessness, incarcerations, abuse and neglect (Garcia, 2019). Again, focusing on meeting more basic needs in the family household to secure safe environments for children exemplifies Maslow's (1943) lower levels of the hierarchy which in turn help to move towards meeting more love and belongingness needs found in the middle of the hierarchy.

Educational Experiences of Foster Children

Legislation is lacking to help support foster children as they transition from placement to placement, aside from the mandatory tracking program begun in 2010. Frequent school changes set foster students back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004) and increase academic knowledge gaps (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016). Researchers have found foster children to have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools, which hampers academic success (Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019) as well as restricts a feeling of belongingness correlated with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. For example, high school foster youth in Colorado have been found to change schools three or more times after the start of ninth

grade (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016). Research confirms that school instability also acts as an indicator for lower graduation rates of foster children in Colorado. Clemens and Sheesley (2016) found that as school changes increase, graduation rates decrease. When belongingness needs (Maslow, 1943) are not met due to instability of placement, the motivation to learn becomes secondary to physiological and safety needs.

Often stemming from school disruptions, students in foster care have difficulty trusting others, feel jaded, and often are disinterested in starting over in a new community and school district (Johnson et al., 2012; Palmieri & Salle, 2016). The challenges that children in foster care face create barriers to academic success (Jacobson, 2008; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Research indicates that when foster children do try to engage with their new placement environment, they are concerned with the stigma of being in foster care and incorporate strategies to fit in with their peers (Johnson et al., 2012). Through personal interviews with former foster youth, Moyer and Goldberg (2019) found that most former foster children felt that educational expectations were lowered for them and that they were treated with pity. Their research also revealed that foster children were more focused on a bigger picture of living and survival in their current situation, rather than focusing on their schoolwork. Relating back to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy, foster children need to have their foundational needs met before being able to access love and belongingness needs. By focusing on survival (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019), foster children limit their ability to move through Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. As a positive use of the survival instinct, researchers have found that children in foster care can transfer the survival skills learned from being in care to their educational environments, showing their resilience, stamina, and perseverance (Jones & Dean, 2020). While these positive traits have been developed and

obtained due to and while in the foster care system, the ability to transfer them into successful educational outcomes is important.

Transition to Adulthood & College from Foster Care

Emancipation of youth in foster care occurs when the individual has reached the age of adulthood as indicated by the state (Naccarato & Hernandez, 2010). Decisions regarding work, college, or both become crucial as the former foster youth must also support themselves financially with minimal help from the government. Federal law requires that assistance be provided to youth leaving foster care in order to develop a transition plan (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The transition plan involves goal planning including educational opportunities, job related and employment services, continued mentoring and support services, housing options, and health insurance documentation.

Although some youth in foster care demonstrate ambition to attend post-secondary colleges and universities, low participation rates in college preparatory courses for this population have not improved (Sandh et al., 2020). During their interviews with former foster children, Jones and Dean (2020) shared that Awnan (a study participant) explained his drive to use the one educational opportunity he had after high school, "since he did not have a home to return to if unsuccessful, he knew he had to make college work" (p. 47). Safety nets, in the form of a feeling of security and adult support, are lacking during the transition to adulthood for former foster children (Amechi, 2020), aside from the minimal supports put in place by the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008. Former foster youth often feel they have no one to rely on during difficult or crisis times as well as no one to share the happy and good times with (Moody, 2018). These feelings are confirmed by research findings that an unsupported transition to adulthood affects educational outcomes, social

exclusion, financial difficulties, and employment opportunities for those who have experienced foster care (Häggman-Laitila, et al., 2018).

Additionally, researchers have found that foster youth are at risk for negative educational outcomes because of the many adversities they encounter due to lack of family supports during the transition process (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2020; Lee & Morgan, 2016). Youth who have transitioned out of foster care are more likely to encounter unemployment, homelessness, poverty, food scarcity, mental health issues, early parenthood, and lower educational attainment. Researchers have found that foster children feel discouragement during the college application process (Jones & Dean, 2020). Foster youth considering college have few people to depend upon to help their transition, especially since they will also be moving out of the foster care system after high school graduation if they are 18 years of age or older (state law dependent). Variances at the state level regarding the age of transition (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and applicable support programs is compounded by the variance of tuition waiver programs, which have been found to increase foster student connection to higher education institutions (Geiger & Okpych, 2021).

Importantly, long term planning and consideration of educational pathways early on for children in foster care helps to address educational progress goals leading to post-secondary education (Snow, 2009). Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, access for former foster youth to higher educational opportunities as well as employment opportunities was disrupted, which necessitates additional resources to ensure stability of school and work (Rosenberg et al., 2022). Foster youth in care also need extended supports which should be provided by the state to guide and protect them as they transition out of foster care. A phenomenological study by Jones & Dean (2020) revealed that half of students who spent time in foster care did not graduate high

school, and of the 10% who did transition to college, less than 2% continued to graduation. Educational supports, especially financial, are important to help foster youth transition into post-secondary programs of study.

Improving the trajectory of foster youth exiting care, use of a self-determination program, such as the My Life model, helps to support a positive transition to adulthood (Powers et al., 2018). Such a model uses fun activities, networking, peer mentoring, self-determination skills, and identification of transition goals to engage foster youth in the transition process as they exit foster care. College support programs and campus initiatives for former foster youth must also consider financial struggles (Miller et al., 2019). Mobility and transportation are an important concern when transitioning into adulthood. As compared to their peers, youth in foster care obtain driver's licenses less often, which limits access to transportation and can affect their well-being (Collins et al., 2020). Exploring options regarding transportation, including public transportation education is an important component of the Foster Care Transition Toolkit (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Transitioning to adulthood can be hampered without proper supports to encourage self-sufficiency, mobility, high school completion, and post-secondary planning.

Educational Supports Resulting in Stability for Foster Children

Vulnerable, yet resilient (Jones & Dean, 2020), courageous, and determined (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), children in foster care deserve opportunities to succeed in school. Acknowledgement that foster students face an array of obstacles is necessary when constructing educational supports (Cox, 2013). Palmieri & LaSalle's (2017) research recognize that foster children have unique needs which necessitate educational resources to provide support to reduce absenteeism and behaviors which lead to detention and suspension. This is

accomplished by identifying the unique needs of the foster child and enacting supports to meet those needs (Scherr, 2007). Palmieri and Salle (2016) recommend that school counselors and psychologists need to be aware of different ways that behaviors present in foster children and note the connection between poor behaviors and academic distress. Their research suggests that integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) for children in foster care raises their awareness of positive behaviors and helps to self-manage their emotions. Being able to manage emotions appropriately in the classroom environment enhances successful learning, thus encouraging students to feel a sense of school and community belonging found in Maslow's (1943) third hierarchy level.

Additionally, implementing structural changes is necessary to connect K-12 schools, social services, and higher education (Jones & Dean, 2020). Working as a team (including school counselors, psychologists, teachers, school staff, and foster parents) can help children in foster care feel a sense of belongingness and feel supported in their educational work. Research indicates that initiating mentoring relationships for foster children with a safe adult can encourage success (Lee & Morgan, 2016). It is important that schools provide a comprehensive range of supports while simultaneously avoiding particular focus on the label of foster child, to avoid a stigmatizing effect (Palmieri & Salle, 2016). A feeling of belonginess and school connectedness should be cultivated in schools by way of encouraging meaningful relationships with adults in school and during extracurricular activities (Somers et al., 2019). Meeting Maslow's (1943) belonginess level of the hierarchy can help students to move onto the esteem level and cultivate feelings of accomplishment.

Likewise, tutoring programs can help to address the educational gaps and grade retention issues for foster children (Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018; Scherr, 2007). School stability, a

predictable learning environment, and seamless transitions help to meet the unique educational needs of youth in foster care (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016). Full year and multiple year school readiness programs to support foster children require sustained financial investment by community and government entities to be successful and ongoing (Lynch et al., 2017). Another approach is shorter, targeted programs which would be more relevant to the transient nature of foster children and cost effective for stakeholders, such as the Kids in Transition (KITS) intervention program.

Considering the unique needs of youth in foster care, the Reach Higher Outreach Program is an excellent example of supports put in place to help foster youth navigate the college decision and application system by forming partnerships with universities and community resources to help connect foster youth and engage them in multiple learning opportunities to demystify the college going process (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). Miller et al., (2019) also note that university sponsored programs are an important support for former foster students. Making sure that faculty and staff are informed about the specific needs of foster youth/alumni as well as cultivating mentor support programs will help to support successful degree completion.

Role of Supportive Foster Parent

Deciding to start the process of becoming a foster parent for many individuals and couples is a calling (Blacquiere & Faasse, 2019). Filling this special role over the years has faced longstanding challenges due to difficulty finding, recruiting, and training foster parents coupled with the ongoing retainment of qualified foster parents (Orme et al., 2017). Foster parents serve a professional role and are thus compensated financially, but many individuals and couples only serve briefly (Cherry & Orme, 2013). Research indicates that those foster parents defined as the “Vital Few” (derived from the Pareto principle) open their homes to 73% of foster children and

are more likely to have one adult who does not work outside of the home (p. 1625). Cherry and Orme (2013) found that the “Vital Few” offer more stable home environments and have more time to foster those placed in their care. Research indicates that for foster children to feel a sense of belonging, the foster parent(s) must create a normal and sustained family environment as well as provide consistent support (Steenbakkers et al., 2021).

Attending to a variety of needs for those foster children in their care, foster parents must prioritize the mental and physical well-being for this vulnerable population. The primary care physician plays a pivotal role attending to the needs of foster children and encouraging the active participation of the foster parent in not only meeting the basic needs of the child, but shaping their “development, education, and psychosocial growth” (Wang et al., 2011, p. 106). Training foster parents in trauma-informed parenting has shown to be effective at not only increasing the knowledgebase of the foster parents, but also responding to the unique needs of foster children (Konijn et al., 2020). It is important to note that during the COVID-19 pandemic, working foster parents were struggling to adapt to the change in educational circumstances resulting in remote learning while simultaneously meeting many other demands associated with caring for foster children (Sciamanna, 2020). Without in-person supports such as school-based therapies, foster parents noted increased anger related behaviors as well as increased feelings of anxiety from those in their care (Rauktis, 2022).

Additionally, foster parents demonstrating more functional parenting is associated with more adaptive developmental outcomes for children in foster care (Chodura et al., 2021). These care givers play an integral role in the lives of foster children by acting in the capacity of a positive adult role model while also providing a stable homelife and environment. The attachment behavior of foster children is mainly influenced by the behavior of the foster parents

(Bovenschen, 2016). Interestingly, an authoritarian parenting style has been found to correlate with higher foster placement stability, while permissive parenting correlated with less total problem behaviors of the foster children (Chodura et al., 2021). Regardless of parenting style, foster parents with higher cognitive empathy and more social family support increase the likelihood of a foster placement success (Miller et al., 2018). Research indicates that meaningful relationships with adults along coupled with tangible supports help foster teens advance better than those without (Ahmann, 2017). Lastly, supportive foster parents can play an important communicative role in allowing foster youth to share their experiences and help them process their past (Steenbakkers, 2016). Through active listening, providing an unbiased and neutral interpretation of the foster youth's story, and advocating for their foster youth, foster parents fill an essential and supportive role as a secure base.

Impact of Online Learning on the Foster Student Population

A gap in the research exists for specific evidence of how online learning impacts foster students. To date only one nationwide study has attempted to assess the impact of COVID-19 on foster youth and those that have aged out of foster care (Jaffe & Wasch, 2020). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, statistics regarding foster children currently placed in online educational environments was not readily available. However, due to the nationwide and global switch to online learning in 2020, more data regarding vulnerable populations is beginning to surface. Collins and Baldiga (2020) speculate that the impact of COVID-19 might prove to be longer lasting for students in foster care.

Interestingly, Collins and Baldiga (2020) hypothesize that the foster student population were acutely affected during the switch to online learning, emphasizing a disruption of normalcy. Middleton (2020) echoes the concerns of short- and longer-term impacts resulting from the

switch to online learning across all populations. Reduced access to educational materials, anxiety, and stress all contribute to a sense of insecurity when normalcy is disrupted. Concrete resources such as Wi-Fi hotspots, laptop computers, gift cards, and groceries can be provided along with emotional support when in-person learning is disrupted, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (Jaffe & Wasch, 2020). Echoing concerns for educational needs post high school, a smaller study of 127 young adults who had experienced foster care reported concerns with the transition to online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially significant given that only a small percentage of foster youth go on post high school to attend college or university (Ruff & Linville, 2021). With reduced access to learning materials, a significant problem of learning loss has occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic (Rauktis, 2022). Understanding that this vulnerable population, with an already disparate representation in higher education, has compounded struggles during a shift to virtual learning, necessitates a call to attention and action for current and former foster youth by way of informational, financial, and tangible supports (Ruff et al., 2022).

By closing schools and effectively removing some of the key supports provided in-person during the school day, foster children lost a connection. While already facing unique challenges, foster students became “doubly disadvantaged” during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sciamanna, 2020, para. 2). Although these changes led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty for many, for foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, a compounded situation unfolded (Blake et al., 2020). Solidified by findings of Greeson et al. (2020) are the voices of 18–23-year-olds (current foster youth and former foster youth) reporting that 31% had lost access to supports during their academic or post-secondary work. However, considered a nationwide study, these voices are not representative of all states within the United States and the

data was self-reported. More statistical quantitative evidence as well as qualitative lived experience research is necessary to project and explain the effect of online learning on foster student educational success.

Considering that the pandemic shift to online learning for all students is currently being researched, early research indicates that students in foster care are less likely to participate in education weekly (Besecker & Thomas, 2020). Data collected by the Los Angeles Unified School District indicates that engagement is lower for foster students when compared to their non-foster peers; however, the early numbers demonstrating this data are specific to school districts/entities and often group foster students with the homeless population. Academic outcomes of children in foster care need to be improved (Somers et al., 2019), which necessitates a closer look at engagement and academic achievement. Demonstration of less frequent engagement and completion of work through the Schoology platform used in the Los Angeles Unified School District begins to show how this population could fall behind (Besecker & Thomas, 2020). More data is necessary to unlock how online learning holistically affects students in foster care, how their needs are met without in-person learning, and to what extent their academic achievement is changed.

Without regard to the switch to online learning resulting from COVID-19, virtual schools could be an option to support foster students who are not receiving needed supports in a brick-and-mortar school (Trinidad & Korman, 2020). This could come in the form of a specific cyber or online charter school with a mission to personalize learning for students who have experienced trauma. Even specific schools set up to serve vulnerable populations (including children in foster care) with multiple services (wraparound programs, health care, emotional support, academic support, special education programs), vary in their educational outcomes and

have not proven to meet the various needs of foster students. One of the greatest challenges of online learning has been linked to the home learning environment (Barrot et al., 2021) which for students in foster care can vary greatly, especially since the training for foster parents is also not standardized (Herbert & Kulkin, 2018). The educational support from the foster parent is of utmost importance during online learning, which could also vary greatly due to their bias of online learning, availability to be at home, and technology savvy. Missing research-based case studies demonstrating positive or negative learning and educational outcomes for children in foster care attending online/virtual school purposefully (not due to the COVID-19 pandemic) represent a gap in the published literature.

Need for Educational Supports for Foster Children

A dire need exists to improve the academic outcomes of children in foster care (Somers et al., 2019). Due to transiency and housing instability, Sandh et al. (2020) found that less than 25% of youth in foster care stayed in the same ZIP code during their high school years. Frequent school changes coupled with behavioral issues put foster children at risk educationally. On top of the continued school changes, foster children more often have experienced trauma and are more likely to drop out of school (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). As compared to their non-foster peers, research indicates that foster children are twice as likely to miss school and be disciplined with out of school suspension (Palmieri & LaSalle, 2017). Foster students have unique educational needs, and this vulnerable population requires additional educational supports (Miller et al., 2019).

Significantly, researchers have found substantial disparity with children in foster care on average being two grade levels behind their peers based on their chronological age (Hunter et al., 2014). Entering the foster care system already behind in school may have taken place because of

the conditions of the biological home, which is then coupled with the separation trauma and school changes leading to continued educational lag and learning gaps (Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Frequent retention for foster children has been documented by researchers evidenced in the 33% of foster students which had been retained at least once or failed a grade (Scherr, 2007). Research findings indicate that students in foster care graduate high school less prepared for college than their peers as is indicated by poor educational outcomes, lower SAT (College Board exam originally standing for Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores, and low passing rates on AP (Advanced Placement) exams (Sandh et al., 2020).

Although the federal government has attempted to acknowledge this specific vulnerable population and enact legislation to aid children in foster care, much needs to be done in the educational setting and home placement to improve educational outcomes (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Also relevant is the need for connection between the foster home and the school to help coordinate and implement an educational plan. To date, few state-level policies for former foster students exist to foster connectedness to education or employment at the age of 21 (Geiger & Okpych, 2021). Encouraging college readiness and providing personalized assistance navigating the college application process for foster children is important due to the considerable opportunity gaps that accrue over time reducing preparedness for college (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). Tuition waivers and educational aid provided at the state level through programs and legislation are an excellent example which has shown to correlate high with connectedness for former foster student to postsecondary education as well as success while enrolled (Geiger & Okpych, 2021).

Summary

Vulnerable children in foster care are among one of the nations most underserved student

populations in education (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). Children that are placed in foster care face significant challenges and difficulties which create barriers to success at school when compared to their non-foster care youth equivalents (Somers et al., 2020). Using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs as a framework to conceptualize the various types of unmet needs for children in foster care, researchers have uncovered serious concerns. Food, finances, social relationships, and housing are often some of the most worrying, yet vital needs for foster children (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). The existing problem of children in foster care placements, who are suffering from a multitude of disadvantages and unmet needs, persists with only meager educational supports in place through government legislation. Researchers have analyzed the sequence of legislative Acts specifically related to children in foster care, which have attempted to address the need for educational supports. The current research demonstrates a continued need to focus on the educational outcomes of foster children due in part to their transient nature and resulting learning gaps. By listening to and analyzing the experiences of children in foster care, researchers have been able to capture these voices and bring about awareness of their unmet educational needs (Amechi, 2020; Greeson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Jones & Dean, 2020).

Although long unnoticed, this population of children has been the topic of recent research suggesting that educational supports are lacking (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Due to poverty, developmental delays, and transiency, academic performance of children in foster care often trails behind that of their non-foster peers (Jacobson, 2010). The result of lacking learning supports puts these students at an educational disadvantage. Researchers have evaluated current supports as well as suggest future educational supports focusing on the learning outcomes of foster children (Moyer & Goldberg, 2019). Addressing such issues as long-term educational

progression for transient foster children to provide consistency and encourage an educational pathway deserves consideration (Snow, 2009).

Ultimately, when schools recognize the unique needs of foster children, they can respond with supports to optimize educational success (Palmieri & Salle, 2016). Forming plans for foster students who transfer into a new school after the start of the school year can help to connect the student with their teachers, school counselors, support staff, and their peers. A gap in the research exists between the perceived lacking supports and opportunities to prioritize motivation and learning to facilitate the educational success of foster children. The gap widens when looking specifically at foster students learning in online environments. It is important to investigate how students in a foster placement can thrive academically in online environments while simultaneously recognizing the challenges and unmet needs this unique population faces.

Importantly, the theoretical value of this study advances and adds to the literature currently using Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs when associating the specific needs of foster students and how those met and unmet needs impact feelings of belongingness in online learning environments. The practical value of my study affects change in educational entities and specifically informs online teachers and school administrators of the unique needs of foster students as well as provides helpful supports which could enhance a feeling of belongingness and safety in online schools consistent with meeting needs in Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. How instruction can be successfully delivered in the classroom with specific emphasis on the needs of foster students as well as how to engage students in foster care in the virtual classroom are both helpful for teachers, and resulting policies, procedures, and program implementation stemming from the data, is important for online school administrators. Understanding the unique lived experiences of foster students in online educational environments impacts how faculty, school

counselors, and administrators acknowledge specific needs and provide supports to meet the needs. Lastly, how educators and administration should work in tandem with foster parents to provide a safe online environment and support educational goals offers practical supports which benefit foster students in online schools.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. Through the collection of lived experiences of former foster students (aged 18-23) who have graduated high school and spent at least one year (defined as nine academic months concurrently or non-consecutively during the grades of 9-12) in a dedicated online high school, this study examined the educational supports specific to the foster student population that exist in online learning environments and the effect that these supports impacted feelings of belongingness, connection, and post-graduation success. Foster children are a vulnerable population and educational supports are necessary to help this population thrive in the school setting (Jones & Dean, 2020). While conducting the research, the supports in place for foster children were generally defined as educational programs, policies, and procedures specifically constructed and implemented for students in foster care. The purpose of this chapter is to present the research design, research questions, setting and participant information, researcher positionality with an emphasis on the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and the role of the researcher. This chapter continues with the data collection procedures and plan, followed by specific measures and analysis for demographic survey, individual interviews, writing prompt collection, and focus group data. This chapter concludes by exploring the data synthesis plan, an explanation of the trustworthiness of the research, ethical considerations, and a summary.

Research Design

This section will summarize the transcendental phenomenological approach and how the design was appropriate for this research study about former foster students who have

experienced online education during high school years. An explanation of qualitative research, followed by why a phenomenological approach is applicable to the research will then move into the specific type of transcendental phenomenology along with a background of the design. Special attention will be made to the idea of Epoche, and later explained in the context of bracketing, due to the researcher's previously mentioned conflict of interest as a former foster child herself. Collection of data specific to the approach and how the researcher intends to interview, collect writing prompts, and hold focus groups will be reviewed and explained. Lastly, the appropriate steps of analysis for the research design is sequenced.

This qualitative study utilizes the transcendental phenomenological research approach which collects the lived experiences of a heterogeneous group by way of in depth and descriptive interview questions as well as other data collection sources to explore a phenomenon and report emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Because this study focuses on the perspectives of former foster students who have experienced online education and the meaning of their experiences, a qualitative research approach is appropriate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research allows the exploration of a problem or issue within a population which is not easily measured quantifiably. Qualitative research necessitates a detailed understanding of the area of study which is rooted in the rich and deep interviews with the participants who are encouraged to tell their stories regardless of the perceived research theme expectation or existing literature.

Phenomenological research, in general, focuses on common themes which result from the lived experiences of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through the research method, later to be explored, the essence of the phenomenon is identified. A phenomenological study emphasizes the phenomenon by exploring personal experiences through interviews with

individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Using a heterogeneous group of individuals, the researcher brackets themselves outside of the experience to fully be present to hear and record the lived experiences of the participants. When collecting research, data collection of interviews can explore what the participants experienced and in what ways they experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). This research is analyzed and reduced to significant participant statements and quotes which become themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ‘what’ that the participants experienced becomes a textural description, and the ‘how’ the participants experienced the phenomenon becomes a structural description in the research which makes up the essence of the lived experience of the participants.

When conducting this phenomenological analysis, Moustakas’s (1994) modification of the van Kaam method was followed. First, the data was reviewed to highlight important statements from the participants which were relevant to the experience, as defined as horizonalizing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Next, reduction and elimination of expressions of the participants took place (Moustakas, 1994). Then, themes emerged from the clustering of the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A final identification of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes occurred, and then traditionally individual textural and structural descriptions of the researcher’s experience would be collected (Moustakas, 1994). However, due to the researcher’s personal connection to the research, this was disclosed in a separate dissertation statement. Finally, the textural and structural descriptions of the participants were developed, and the essence of the phenomenon noted in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transcendental phenomenology according to Moustakas (1994) focuses on the descriptive stories and lived experiences of participants. Core components of the approach

include intentionality, intuition, and Epoche. The research approach is intentional in reference to consciousness and being present “to ourselves and to things in the world” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 28). Intentionality brings about consciousness of all things in the world including thoughts feelings, and actions (van Manen, 2011). Intuition, on the other hand is something that one knows for themselves from their instincts. Moustakas (1994) explains that “all things become clear and evident through an intuitive-reflective process” (p. 32). For the research to be fully conscious and intentional, Epoche is important. Although Moustakas (1994) explains Epoche as both a “preparation for deriving new knowledge” and as setting aside prejudices and bias to allow a new and fresh vision of the phenomenon (p.85), the research term has also become synonymous with bracketing. For the purposes of this research, Epoche is defined as the researcher setting aside their experiences to be able to see the phenomenon freshly without bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcendental phenomenological approach is applicable to my research because it is “oriented towards lived experience” with the use of participant stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.77). Capturing the voices of former foster students who have experienced online education during their high school years, uncovered themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty. After collecting the data, generating the themes, developing the textural and structural descriptions, the essence of the phenomenon was reported and presented in this written dissertation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Phenomenology’s historical origin is rich with philosophic thought and heavily influenced by Husserl (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Other classic phenomenologists include Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Pontyels, each of which used different methods to produce different results, yet their prominent works have influenced the field (Smith, 2018). Moustakas’ (1994) specific transcendental phenomenology approach is influenced by the research models of

ethnography, grounded research theory, hermeneutics, empirical phenomenology, and heuristics along with a significant recognition of Husserl. Husserl's (1931) emphasis on intentionality acts as a foundational component of understanding the act of consciousness (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl's (1931) focus on Epoche is also a core component, previously described as the ability to set aside bias and judgment to offer a pure and fresh vantage point (Moustakas, 1994).

Research Questions

The purpose of this section is to list the central research question along with the three sub-questions which guided the research study. Study findings provided answers and discussion of the research questions.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of former foster students who have spent time learning through online educational platforms/schools?

Sub-Question One

How do students who have experienced foster care form connections with peers and adults through online learning?

Sub-Question Two

How do students who have experienced foster care perceive online learning environments (positively, negatively, and/or comparatively with their personal brick and mortar experience)?

Sub-Question Three

How do former foster students feel that online education prepared them for post high school graduation?

Setting and Participants

The purpose of this section is to describe the setting of the research, which is unique in that the setting did not take place in one location, and all data collection was completed virtually allowing for participants to live in any part of the United States. This section also describes the participants with a specific focus on the criteria for selection in the research study.

Setting

The setting of the study was far reaching due to the specific participant group criteria and necessity to capture a variety of online educational situations. Because the major method of data collection involved interviews, which Creswell and Poth (2018) acknowledge as a main vehicle to collect shared experiences, the setting of the study was virtual in nature providing opportunities for Zoom meeting recorded interviews. When working with the vulnerable population of participants, in-person interviews were not utilized as another method to help bracket the experiences of the researcher, resulting instead with virtual interviews and focus groups. These recorded online interviews and sessions allowed a greater reach of participants from different parts of the United States.

Online education looked different for each participant geographically as well as situationally. For example, variations in the way the online education program was synchronous, asynchronous, or hybrid as well as if the online school was state specific, national, or local to the student made each setting unique to the participant. Another important consideration was whether the shift to online learning was due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the case of this study all participants experienced online learning while in foster care specifically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While not an original requirement, this became a specific trend in the data collection. The setting of this study was therefore broad reaching resulting in a variety of online

educational experiences collected from the participants through virtual interviews. Rationale to support the decision to use a nationwide setting and virtual data collection stems from the difficulty of locating former foster students who meet the specific criteria below.

Participants

This study captured the lived experiences of former foster students in the United States who have graduated from online or in-person high school within academic years 2021 or 2022 (originally open to those who graduated within the last three academic years 2020, 2021, or 2022) resulting in an age range between 18-21 (originally open to those aged 18-23). They also experienced foster care during a period of time that included at least one high school year enrolled in a virtual learning program (defined as nine educational months concurrent or not concurrent during grades 9-12). The participants experienced a minimum of nine months of high school online learning while in foster care as a requirement of the study. This resulted in participants who had experienced between 9-12 months of online learning. Using a heterogeneous group (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of former foster students who had all participated in high school online education offered lived experiences and first-person perspective on educational supports provided in online/virtual learning environments and feelings of connectedness and belongingness. The intended final sample size of 10 participants was appropriate for a phenomenology study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of the study was to describe a “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Participants included three male and seven female former foster students of a variety of self-reported ethnicities including Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic. Although participant self-reported sex and ethnicity data was collected, it was not used as a quota for participation in the study. Nor did it impact participant eligibility in the study.

Researcher Positionality

My research followed the social constructivism paradigm. As a former foster child, I offered a unique perspective because I grew up in an educational world that offered me various opportunities as well as closed doors due to my circumstances. Learning gaps due to multiple foster home placements and enrollment in various school systems would be one example of how I developed a subjective meaning of my world, and which impacted my views on the government run foster care system and the district educational systems. As a teacher, I have experienced several transient foster students in my classes who were placed in my course for a limited amount of time. In addition to my firsthand knowledge as a former foster student, I observed more evidence that foster children suffered from loss of connectedness, belonging, and became, to some extent, jaded of how the educational system would support, help, or benefit them. My research recognized how background experiences shape interpretation of meaning for former foster children through individual accounts.

Interpretive Framework

In social constructivism, “individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and work” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 24). They form varied meanings of their experiences which can lead to complex views of the situation. As the researcher, I focused on the lived experiences of former foster students and how they came to form their educational worldview. I used general questions during my interviews and focus groups to open dialog for the participants to share their past online learning experiences and implications for their present-day life. My method of reporting of their lived experiences could have been impacted to some extent by my own background in foster care. To avoid the potential impact, I practiced bracketing during the data collection processes and was careful to clearly report the participant experiences. My goal,

as the investigator of this transcendental phenomenological study, was to focus on the description of my participants' experiences and not interpret the experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I explain below how my three philosophical assumptions below guided my research.

Philosophical Assumptions

This section explains my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions which center on my values. It is important to clarify my belief system which guided my research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My view of reality, how reality is known to me, and my value-stance taken on the research was applied through the social constructivism lens.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption clarifies that "multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interactions with others" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). My ontological assumption focuses on the reality that God's truth is the only truth, thus a singular universal reality; however, multiple realities were perceived during my lived experience as a non-Christian foster child, positioning me in a unique category to understand the varied voices and experiences of my participants. To capture the multiple realities from my participants, I reported their varied perspectives on the emergent themes of the research, as well as how they perceived their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). It is already documented that foster students have difficulty obtaining a sense of belonging (Somers et al., 2020), but most data and research looks only at brick-and-mortar learning settings. My research adds to the existing research, with a specific focus of online learning supports and experiences through my phenomenological approach.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption explains that "reality is co-constructed between the

researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). Subjective data was obtained from all participants during surveys, interviews, focus groups, and writing prompt collection. By making clear the roles of the researcher and the participants from the first interview meeting, I lessened the distance between myself and the participants, yet also established my clear role as the interviewer/researcher. I maintained my role of researcher while also establishing rapport with my participants by giving a short background of my time in foster care and sharing a brief overview of my current profession as an online educator. I used direct quotes from my participants in my research and encouraged them to share their personal examples during my interviews by way of open-ended questions. I then followed-up with more detailed questioning, utilizing some of my own constructs of foster care and education as the interviews continued.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption notes that "individual values are honored and are negotiated among individuals" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). I specified with my participants and throughout my research that biases were present due to my childhood years spent in foster care. I also declared my current position as an online educator and former employment teaching in-person at K-12 public schools in Pennsylvania. Both situations were necessary to disclose and be cognizant of as the research process unfolded. My values, based on my experiences, could have shaped the narrative and could have impacted the way I interpreted and reported the lived experiences of my participants. Again, bracketing was necessary to maintain accurate accounts of participant data. A strong focus on bracketing my biases due to my personal history was necessary to report the truth of the phenomenon in this final report and not an interpretation. As Moustakas (1994) explains, in Epoche, judgments, understandings, and knowing must be set

aside to be able to see and experience the phenomenon from a fresh perspective.

Researcher's Role

As the human instrument for this study, I conducted all interviews and focus groups as well as analyzing the data from multiple sources to be able to report the emerging themes and descriptive lived experiences of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Moustakas, 1994). I brought to this study, in my role as the researcher, potential biases and assumptions which were clarified. Interviewing former foster students was of interest to me because I specifically felt the lack of educational supports when I transitioned through different school districts as a foster student. As an adult, I can identify K-12 educational concepts and content that I never properly mastered and/or did not learn in a meaningful sequence, which I attributed to the many physical and educational moves during my time spent in foster care. My feelings of belongingness and connection varied greatly based upon which foster family I lived with, and the time spent in various school districts.

Due to being removed from my biological home and placed in foster care for a span of approximately ten years, I experienced several moves to different households which resulted in changing school districts during elementary and middle school years. My perspective on my own transient foster care years brought potential bias to my study, especially due to my significant learning gaps. Although my foster care experience contained specific neglect and abuse factors, I acknowledge that each situation is unique for children who are removed from their biological family and relocated into a new foster placement. Because of these unique situations, each individual story and lived experience had various contributing factors, which I reported accurately and without personal bias in my narrative.

I also currently teach sixth grade at a fully virtual middle school. My previous role as a

former brick and mortar educator and current role as an online educator bring prior experiences of having students who were in foster care as well as past experiences with how prior employers did not offer supports for foster students. My former students' situations and my response/interventions as a teacher could have potentially added bias to my study, thus bracketing was employed as an effect measure to maintain accurate reporting of the data. As an educator, I can identify that my previous experience in brick-and-mortar school districts consistently did not provide any supports above the required government tracking of foster children. During all of my in-person and virtual years of teaching, I have never been included in a meeting regarding educational supports due to the sole designation of a student being in foster care. Nor have I ever been given specific training or direction when instructing foster students in a brick and mortar or online classroom which would help me to understand their specific needs or helpful supports. In my current and previous teacher roles, I have not witnessed any special support groups set up within the school district for foster students. I have personally noticed that many teachers tend to invest less effort in this transient group of students when they are made aware of the status of a foster student, as they often anticipate the student will not be in their class for a substantial amount of time. Bracketing my personal beliefs and perspectives was extremely important during my research. Using reflexive journaling and weekly sessions with an outside therapist allowed me the ability to write and discuss my personal feelings throughout the data collection and reporting of the findings for my study. During data collection and analysis, I accurately represented the lived experiences of my participants without observing them solely through the lens of an online educator or former foster student.

As the setting for this research did not have one specific location and since I communicated with participants through online platforms, I did not have any personal

connection or relationship with any participants prior to their acceptance in the study. At no point during the research did I have any authority over my participants. By way of a demographic survey, online interviews, online focus group sessions, and individual writing prompts, I induced emerging themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty. I interpreted the themes based on the collected data. Following the social constructivism paradigm, I used a literary style in my writing to convey the lived experiences of my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Procedures

This section begins with an explanation of the study permissions, process of Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval (see Appendix A), and participant recruitment plan. It continues with a lengthy discussion regarding data collection and analysis for each of the four data collection opportunities in the study. This section concludes with an examination of the synthesis of the data to achieve triangulation. Because of these descriptive procedures, the study is able to be replicated for potential future researchers.

Permissions

Permission to conduct this study was granted by Liberty University's IRB (see Appendix A) before any participants were recruited for the study. Permission forms for participants were sent electronically with a follow-up virtual conversation made available (optionally) to all participants to address any questions and/or concerns. No participants requested a virtual conversation; however, some participants did ask questions during the interview sessions about why the research was being conducted, not specifically about permissions. The approved informed consent document (see Appendix F) reviewed voluntary participation as well as noted that those involved in the study were not placed at undue risk (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All

participants completed the consent form by activating a Yes radio button that they had read and agreed to the consent file, and then typed their name and date electronically to indicate their consent in the study. No data collection took place before consent was given. Physical site permissions were not applicable to my study due to the nature of data collection explained below.

Recruitment Plan

Studying a heterogeneous group (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of former foster students who had all participated in high school online education for at least one year while in their foster placement (defined as nine academic months concurrently or non-consecutively during the grades of 9-12) offered lived experiences and first-person perspectives on educational supports provided in online/virtual learning environments. As the researcher, my findings describe a "common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75).

Although the specific number of participants required when conducting a phenomenology can be varied, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend enough participants to reach a point of saturation. The idea of saturation demonstrates that the participant lived experiences are representative of the data and that no new aspects of the phenomenon would emerge given additional participants (Saunders et al, 2017). To collect lived experiences, over-recruitment of 11 participants through purposive sampling took into consideration potential attribution and supplied a final sample size of 10 participants appropriate for a phenomenology study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Purposive sampling was not based on probability, instead an intentional group of individuals who had experienced the phenomenon were recruited (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

recruitment email was sent to multiple foster care support organizations, which in turn forwarded the information to those that might be interested. When interviewing participants, two participants had peers they recommended as potential participants in the study. The current participants noted that they forwarded the recruitment email. Snowball sampling, due to identification of other people who have experienced the phenomenon from those meeting the criteria, also led to participant recruitment (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ages of participants began at a minimum of age 18 due to informed adult consent. To collect recent and relevant data, it was important to stay within the range of graduation from high school within the last three academic years (2020-2022), which would have resulted in an approximate age range falling between 18-23. Using the graduation and age criteria, the final sample of participants all graduated within the last two academic years 2021 and 2022. The age range of the participants fell between 18-21. Potential participants responded to the recruitment email (see Appendix H) by clicking a link which directed them to a Google form beginning with the informed consent file and a request to activate a Yes radio button that they read and agreed to the consent file, as well as type their name and current date to demonstrate agreement. After informed consent was obtained, the Google Form continued to the screening questions (see Appendix I). If any single screening question response did not meet the study requirements, the Google Form immediately ended with a thank you message and note that the potential participant did not meet the study criteria. When all three screening questions were answered in a way that met the study requirements, the participant was acknowledged as meeting the study criteria, thanked for their willingness to continue, and sent directly to the demographic and focused life history set of questions (see Appendix J).

The sample pool for this qualitative study was difficult to quantify. Approximately 20,000 youth age out of the foster care system typically at the age of 18 (Amechi, 2021) resulting in an estimated sample population of 120,000 former foster students meeting the study age range criteria. Of these students, it was approximated that at least 40,000 former students experienced at least nine months of high school online education predominantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These anticipated students in the sample pool would have graduated from high school in 2021 and 2022. This study participant pool was not contingent upon online education resulting from the pandemic; however, population numbers were estimated due to resulting circumstances.

While it was desired to have a similar ratio of males to females represented in the study, due to the sampling method it was acknowledged that the gender ratio might not be equivalent. The recruitment goal was to include at least one participant of the other sex, if the majority of participants tended to be the other. The resulting participants were seven female and three male. Although ethnic makeup and diversity were reported in the data collection, this information was not a contingent factor when recruiting participants. Recruited participants in the study identified as Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic ethnicities.

Locating the participants required concerted effort, but since a large geographical range was utilized, participants were recruited across the United States. To locate potential participants, I networked with case workers and agencies which specifically helped youth who transition out of foster care due to age and high school graduation. These agencies were set up as a way to help support youth who had "aged out" of foster care. Although these agencies were not the site of the research, per my request, they were able to send the recruitment email (see Appendix H) to local chapters which then passed the study information on to interested former foster students that may have met the study requirements and demonstrated interest. The recruitment email also noted the

$25 gift card incentive for each participant after successful completion of all parts of the study. Social media was also used as a recruiting tool (see Appendix G); however, no participants were successfully screened using the social media link. It was important to obtain participants from a variety of geographical areas who had attended various online schools to gain a diverse collection of experiences, thus not one specific foster care support organization was requested to send out the recruitment email. To collect a varied sample population, assorted methods of recruitment through several agencies were necessary.

Data Collection Plan

To collect the voices of former foster students who have experienced online education during their high school experiences (between the grades of 9-12), data collection through demographic surveys, interviews, writing prompts, and focus groups was necessary. Participants had multiple opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions with the researcher through interview and focus group dialog with both data collection methods being structured by open ended questions. Additionally, the participants provided demographic information by survey and detailed writing prompts which evidenced feelings and statements specific to their experiences while learning online in foster placement. Triangulation of the four sources of data collection assisted the researcher in answering the three research questions.

Demographic and Focused Life History Survey

Collecting demographic and life history information about participants allowed the researcher to obtain important information which helped the researcher guide the interview questions and affirm that information is accurate (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the informed consent and successful completion of the screening questions, participants continued with a demographic and focused life history survey by way of a Google Form consisting of 13

questions. A time stamped response was collected through the resulting Google Form spreadsheet and saved safely in the virtual cloud as well as downloaded as a file with a backup location. Receipt of the completion of the survey triggered a response to the participant of thanks and gratitude for completing the survey with an email or phone call of potential times and dates to schedule the interview. If the participant did not respond to the email within five business days, the researcher called the participant to schedule the interview. Estimated time to complete the survey was 10 minutes. Each question aligns with the central research question in regards to the participant lived experience.

Demographic and Focused Life History Survey Questions

1. Please provide your contact information:
    a. Email address ________________________________
    b. Phone number _______________________________
2. When did you first attend an online learning environment in high school? 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade
    a. Was this related to the COVID-19 Pandemic? yes or no
    b. When did you stop attending this online learning environment? 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade, I graduated from this online learning environment/school.
    c. Why did you stop attending this online learning environment? __________
3. What is your gender? Female, Male, Other, Prefer not to answer
4. How would you classify yourself? (Options included below – may select several):
    a. African American or Black
    b. Asian
    c. Caucasian

d. Hispanic or Latino
e. Indigenous Person
f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
g. Other ________________

5. What age did you enter the foster care system? 0-18, I do not remember.
6. What age did you exit the foster care system? 14-18, other
7. How many placements (homes) did you experience while in the foster care system? 0-3, 4-6, 7-9. 10-12. 13 or more, I do not remember
8. How many times did you change school when in foster care? 0-3, 4-6, 7-9. 10-12. 13 or more, I do not remember
    a. Of those times you changed schools, how many occurred during the grades of 9-12? ___________
9. What is your marital status? Single, Married, Divorced, Separated, Prefer not to answer, Other
10. Are you a parent? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
11. Are you employed? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
12. Are you a student in a post-secondary program? Yes Full-time, Yes Part-time, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
13. Are you homeless or about to be homeless? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other

Survey data was requested of each participant prior to the interview to provide background data which could be used in the research participant analysis as well as ready the researcher for continued prompting of specific data points. Each question aligns with the central research question to relate back to the study problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and

empirical literature. Questions one, three, and four make up the demographic information of the participation. Question two enquires about the online experience of the participant. Questions five-eight garner more information about the participants experience in foster care placements. Questions nine-12 engage the participant to share more demographic information of their adult/current life. Question 13 is used to offer help and assistance if the participant was experiencing homelessness.

Demographic and Focused Life History Survey Analysis Plan

When conducting data analyses of the participant survey information, Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method was followed. Data analysis of the survey data preliminarily focused on three main categories including a) Epoche, which will be referred to as bracketing, b) reductions to derive the textural descriptions, and c) imaginative variation to create the structural essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Survey data was reviewed for accuracy and any follow-up for clarification was done during the first interview. The received survey data was reviewed to highlight important statements, phrases, and choices from the participants which were noted as being relevant to the experience, as defined as horizonalizing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). The data was also used to create a vignette of each participant prior to the interview. Coding of the participant data was completed manually with hard and digital copies of the answers in spreadsheet form which allowed the researcher to mark up the file, add comments, and highlight details. During coding, I, as the researcher, used memoing to record my own feelings, thoughts, and ideas, especially as I prepared for the interview. Memoing also included researcher notes as to key themes, ideas, and concepts noticed in the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Analytical memos allowed the researcher to reflect and expound on the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Not surprisingly reduction and elimination of expressions of the participants from the survey data was minimal, but in line with the data analysis approach, these expressions (or choices) were reviewed (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher was interested in comparing responses as similarities in the data emerged and needed to be grouped together. Commonalities among participants were also grouped. When reviewing the categorized survey data, common themes did not yet emerge, but instead I was able to interpret the data patterns from a quantitative and grouping lens. The participant information was used to create the textural descriptions of the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A final identification of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes occurred; however, due to the survey data not requesting the participant to elaborate on the question, this final identification was more to prepare for the upcoming interview session. Traditionally, individual textural and structural descriptions of the researcher's experience would be collected (Moustakas, 1994); however, due to the researcher's personal connection to the research, this was disclosed in a separate role of the researcher statement. Lastly, the textural and structural descriptions of the participants began to be developed which later would be synthesized to document the essence of the phenomenon written in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Individual Interviews

Interviewing participants that have a shared experience was the main source of data collection for this research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An extensive interview was conducted by the researcher with former students who experienced foster care during which time they participated in high school cyber/online education. These semi-structured recorded interviews were held over the Zoom platform and typically ranged from 45-60 minutes. A secondary audio recording device was utilized as a backup record of the interview. Time extensions were

dependent on the detail of the participant when relaying the narrative experience and question responses. While some participants were short and clear with responses, others described experiences which required more time to dialog. These participants often felt comfortable sharing stories and narratives of their experiences. Semi-structured interviews consisted of a topic focus for the respondent, with the use of questions which were open-ended and were asked in a variety of ways to different participants (DeCarlo, 2018). The structure of the questions was modified or reorganized based on the responses from participants. Interview questions did not need to be refined after the first interview, nor was a pilot interview employed. Participant tone, vocal inflections, and gestures were manually noted by the researcher and taken into account to modify the way in which the follow-up question was asked to make sure the emotions, needs, and vulnerabilities of the participants were respected. These in-depth interviews highlighted and brought to the forefront what the participants believed were important about the topic in their own words.

Beginning the interview, an icebreaker question inquiring in a genuine way about the participant's current situation helped the interviewee feel comfortable as well as established rapport. This was followed by a grand tour question which allowed the participant to share an overview (Marshall & Rossman, 2012) of how they came to be enrolled in an online school during their foster care experience. After establishing rapport with the participant, the following interview questions, also found in Appendix C, were addressed to assist the researcher in answering the research study central question (marked by CRQ) and sub-sub-questions (marked by SQ1-3):

Individual Interview Questions

1. To begin, would you tell me more about yourself and your household? (CRQ)

2. Would you tell me more about your experience in cyber/online school? (CRQ)
3. How long were you enrolled? (SQ2)
4. Why were you enrolled? (SQ2)
5. How did your choice play into being enrolled? (SQ2)
6. What type of school did you attend prior? (SQ2)
7. How did you feel about changing/transitioning to an online school? (SQ2)
8. Had you ever been in cyber school prior to high school? (SQ2)
9. What are your thoughts about how you felt connected to your peers in cyber school? (SQ1)
10. How do you feel you did or did not feel connected to your teachers in cyber school? (SQ1)
11. Can you tell me about how a special person (teacher, counselor, administrator) at the cyber school that helped you? (SQ1)
12. As a former foster student, what do you feel the online environment educationally did to help you succeed? (SQ3)
13. From the view of being in foster care, how do you feel the online school met your needs above and beyond what your peers might have experienced? Were you involved in any special programs or support groups? (SQ2 & SQ3)
14. Can you explain why the transition from a brick-and-mortar school to a cyber school occurred? (CRQ)
15. How do you feel about the transition? (SQ1)
16. What supports at the online school do you think helped you? (SQ2)

17. Did you feel that anything educationally or socially was missing to help you succeed online that you saw your peers experience? (SQ3)

The semi-structured interview utilized questions which were open-ended to collect experiences from the participants (DeCarlo, 2018). Each interview question above aligned with a specific research question or sub-question and was specifically developed to relate to the study problem, purpose, framework, and empirical research. Question one built rapport with the participant and focused on the current state of the participant. It respected that they might not have a family, but that the household might consist of friends or others. Responses to this question helped to ready the participant for the following grand tour question (question two) in which the researcher facilitated the beginning of the narrative story of the participant.

Question three continued to allow the participant story to unfold and sometimes led the researcher to ask about multiple enrollments, or reasons for transitions. Question four acted a follow up to question three to garner more information about online enrollment. Question five attempted to investigate if the participant had a choice or say in the matter of online enrollment and was followed by question six which gained background information to guide future questions on differences between online and in-person education. While question seven focused on feelings and requested examples of the transition, question eight collected the timeline of the participant's schooling experience and later helped to adjust questions based on prior online learning experiences.

Question nine moved the interview focus to research sub-question number one by collecting feelings of belongingness and connection relating to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy. Question ten continued the focus on feelings yet related them specifically to the adults at the school. Further questioning at this point in the interview moved in the direction of other school

support people, such as counselors, principals, coaches, etc. Question 11 requested a specific example to obtain direct statements about an instrumental person at the online school.

Question 12 moved the interview focus to research sub-question three by investigating a potential connection of online education to future success. This question also functioned as an opportunity for the participant to explain what they felt was lacking in online school that would have helped. Question 13 brought to the attention the status of the participant as a former foster student, making specific mention of the foster care "status" which opened the response to their feelings of labeling. The researcher also looked for specific examples of supports such as groups or programs due to their foster student "status." Relating these feeling back to the central research question, interview question number 14 encouraged the sharing of a narrative of the transition experience, not simply feelings from the previous questioning. Responses included reasoning for transition from biological home to placement, including abuse, neglect, and other difficult situations necessitating foster placement. This was followed by question 15 which asked about participant feelings as the researcher encouraged the participant to look back on the situation from the adult standpoint to gain a lens view. Question 16 focused on perceived supports by collecting specific examples. If none, the researcher prompted the respondent for what could have been helpful and why. Question 17 concluded the interview as the researcher encouraged the participant to look at not only the educational component of online learning as a foster student but the social connection to future success.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis of the individual interviews preliminarily focused on three main categories including a) Epoche, which will be referred to as bracketing, b) reductions to derive the textural descriptions, and c) imaginative variation to create the structural essence of the experience

(Moustakas, 1994). During the process of data collection and analysis it was imperative that the researcher bracketed their own experience. Bracketing was important to ensure that all prejudgments, preconceived ideas, and biases were set aside during the length of the research study (Moustakas, 1994). Following each interview, transcription was necessary and manually checked against the speech to text function in the Zoom recording. The researcher verified the correct transcription by review of the recording at least twice and conducted member checks to ensure accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To generate themes from the recorded interview data collected, significant statements were highlighted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Horizonalization of the data required the use of listing "every significant statement relevant to the topic" and then giving the statements "equal value" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 314; Moustakas, 1994). When reviewing the interview transcripts, the significant statements were noted as well as sentences or direct quotes which centered around how the participants experienced online education as a foster student, the phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Statements that were not relevant to the topic were removed to leave only the horizons (Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas (1994) explains, when completing the process of horizonalizing the data, "we seek to disclose" the "nature and essence" of the phenomenon (p. 95).

After horizonalization of the data was completed, clusters of meaning from the captured significant statements were manually categorized into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To be able to write a deep textural description of what the participants experienced, the significant statements were added to the setting of the influence (online education) in the composite description. Coding of the statements was done manually using hard and digital copies of the interviews which allowed the researcher to mark up the transcript, add comments, and highlight

details. During coding, the researcher used memoing to record their own feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Memoing also included records of “short phrases, ideas, or key concepts” noted during the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). Analytical memos also allowed the researcher to reflect and expound on the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Once the codes were determined, the data was organized into categories (Saldaña, 2021). Commonalities were grouped as well as similarities in the data. When looking at the categorized data, common themes emerged, and the researcher reported the common patterns. The patterns and themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A storyline began to develop, and the structural descriptions were integrated as the “meanings and essences of the phenomenon [were] constructed” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 119).

Writing Prompts

Examining a first-person account through a journal prompt allowed the researcher to examine and analyze a purposeful document as part of the data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Following the interview, participants were sent an electronic Google Form with the writing prompts. A time stamped response was collected through the Google Form and saved safely in the virtual cloud as well as downloaded as a file with a backup location. Receipt of the completion of the writing prompts triggered a response to the participant of thanks and gratitude for completing the prompt with a request to confirm the time and date of the focus group interview (two choices will be provided). Each participant was given two weeks to complete the journal writing prompts before the researcher intended to remind the participant for completion; however, all writing prompts were completed in a timely manner. The writing prompt questions (also found in Appendix E), sent through the Google Form, were short enough to not overwhelm

the participant, yet open ended to allow for a thoughtful response. Estimated time to complete the writing prompts was 20-30 minutes. Each prompt aligned with the research central and sub-questions as noted below:

Writing Prompt Questions

1. "When I was at my online school, one adult who made me feel welcome was ________________. I felt this way because _____________." (SQ1)
2. "When I transferred to my online school, I was concerned about _________________. I was able to overcome this challenge by __________________________ OR I was not able to overcome this concern because ____________________________" (CQ & SQ2)
3. "I felt supported in my academic career at my online school because ___________________." (CQ & SQ2)
4. "One example of my online school supporting my plan of graduation is _____________________." (SQ3)
5. "Online education gave me the tools to be able to do ____________________ after graduation." (SQ3)

Five specific writing prompts were requested of each participant to provide a purposeful document as part of the data collection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each writing prompt aligned with the central or sub-research questions to relate back to the study problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and empirical literature. The first writing prompt investigated a specific situation of a formed connection with the online school, which was followed by the second open ended prompt which captured feelings of the participant during a transition time as part of the lived foster student experience. The third writing prompt captured the lived experience through an example of a supported time for the participant as well as the participant perception of the

support. The fourth writing prompt also collected an example, but instead focused on the preparation for post high school experiences through the graduation plan aligning with the literature review regarding transition services. The final writing prompt gained an example of a way that online education readied the participant for post-graduation life.

Writing Prompt Analysis Plan

When conducting data analyses of the participant writing prompts, Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method was followed. Data analysis of the writing prompts preliminarily focused on three main categories including a) Epoche, which will be referred to as bracketing, b) reductions to derive the textural descriptions, and c) imaginative variation to create the structural essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Writing prompt data was reviewed for accuracy and any follow-up for clarification was done between the researcher and participant prior to the focus group interview. The received data was reviewed to highlight important statements and phrases from the participants which was relevant to the experience, as defined as horizonalizing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A similar coding process, as explained in the interview analysis section occurred. Coding of the statements was completed manually with hard and digital copies of the writing prompt statements which allowed the researcher to mark up the document, add comments, and highlight details. During coding, the researcher used memoing to record their own feelings, thoughts, and ideas. Memoing also included researcher notes as to key themes, ideas, and concepts noticed in the writing prompt data (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). Analytical memos also allowed the researcher to reflect and expound on the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Reduction and elimination of expressions of the participants from the writing prompts was minimal, but in line with the data analysis approach, these expressions were reviewed

(Moustakas, 1994). As the researcher, I was interested in comparing responses as similarities in the data emerged and needed to be grouped together. Commonalities were also grouped. When reviewing the categorized writing data, common themes emerged, and the researcher interpreted the data patterns. The common themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A final identification of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes occurred. Traditionally, individual textural and structural descriptions of the researcher's experience would be collected (Moustakas, 1994); however, due to the researcher's personal connection to the research, this was disclosed in the role of the researcher section. Lastly, the textural and structural descriptions of the participants were developed which was later synthesized to document the essence of the phenomenon written in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Focus Groups

Online focus groups provided the advantage of time efficiency for the participants due to location and situational constraints (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the sensitive nature of the reason for placement in foster care, previous abuse, neglect, and/or traumatic situations for the vulnerable population of participants, meeting and sharing experiences in a focus group setting was carefully constructed. Participants were given two different time slot options to schedule their online focus group. They joined one of the online and recorded focus groups which consisted of four participants with the researcher acting as a facilitator. Two participants in the study did not appear for the scheduled focus group session. Focus groups were limited in size to allow for all participants to have a voice and for the researcher to be able to gather group level data. The recorded interview also utilized a backup mechanism to record the verbal responses by phone. The researcher was cognizant of how the participants affirmed each other and shared

similar feeling statements, by making notes of gestures and body language in addition to the recorded transcription.

To create triangulation of the data collection, the focus group removed the need for a follow up interview with the participant and instead offer corroborating evidence to highlight emerging themes through a fourth data collection method (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each focus group lasted approximately 45-60 minutes and was recorded over the Zoom platform. An advantage of using Zoom for online focus groups was the time efficiency due to no need for travel (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participant physical locations were anticipated to be across the United States, thus making in-person focus groups extremely expensive and difficult to schedule. Special attention was made to timing of proposed focus group options due to different time zones. Participants were asked to turn on camera and the researcher encourage all participants to talk and share. The researcher also monitored those participants that tended to dominate the discussion and redirected the conversation as needed.

Analysis of individual interview data collection and writing prompts brought light themes to highlight in the focus group questions. By bringing back common interview themes to the focus group participants, member checking solidified the data (Saldaña, 2021). Six general questions with a loose structure (found below and in Appendix D) were used in each focus group as the guiding questions to answer the central and subordinate research questions as notated below.

Focus Group Questions

1. You have all experienced part of your high education in an online environment. Would you please share one of the positive experiences that online education provided? (SQ2)

2. As a former foster student, you have experienced moves between homes, placements, and possibly schools, when thinking back to the transition from in-person learning to virtual learning, can you share your feelings on the transition? (Researcher will prompt with examples if participants do not begin, such as "scared," "concerned," "anxious," "annoyed," etc. (CRQ & SQ2)
3. How did you feel about sharing your status as a foster student? What was the impact of others knowing your status? (CRQ & SQ1)
4. What role did your caretaker play in your virtual education? (SQ1)
5. How did you feel connected to the online school? What helped you feel connected? *If respondents proceed with negative statements, the researcher will ask the question,* What ways could the school have made you felt connected? (SQ1)
6. How did online education help you after graduation? *Students might have a negative response (which will also be collected and affirmed) and potentially encourage the researcher to rephrase the question to:* What would have helped you succeed after graduation which was lacking at your online school? (SQ3)

To encourage a productive online focus group session, six main questions were asked to the participants to maximize time efficiency with the researcher acting in a facilitation role of the discussion (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each focus group question aligned with either the central research question or one of the three sub-questions and also related to the study problem, purpose, theoretical framework, and empirical literature. Question one opened the focus group by beginning the session without focus on "foster status" but instead on the shared experience of online education. The researcher encouraged participants to identify themselves and began the facilitation of the meeting by way of allowing each individual to speak on the introductory

question. The second focus group question connected prior transitions with the school learning transition and attempted to collect feelings and possibly examples. The third question built upon prior foster care status with a direct question about how that might have impacted peer relationships or student teacher relationships. The researcher also clarified if foster student status was shared with others. The fourth question attempted to understand the level of support at home educationally connecting to the role of the caretaker/foster parent literature review. Question five facilitated conversation about school supports, school role models, and school programs which were positive, but also allowed for negative responses in a constructive manner. The final question related to the impact of online education following graduation.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

When conducting phenomenological analyses of the focus group data, Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method was followed. Data analysis of the focus group data preliminarily was focused on three main categories including a) Epoche, which will be referred to as bracketing, b) reductions to derive the textural descriptions, and c) imaginative variation to create the structural essence of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Focus groups were limited in size to allow for all participants to have a voice and for the researcher to be able to gather group level data. The researcher was cognizant of how the participants affirmed each other and shared similar feelings. The researcher also made note of gestures and body language of the participants. These researcher notes were analyzed. Each recorded data transcript from the focus group was reviewed and cross checked twice against the Zoom recording transcript by the researcher. Member checks were necessary to confirm accuracy of the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the data had been deemed an accurate representation of the statements made by the members of the focus group, the data was reviewed to highlight important statements from the participants which were relevant to the experience, as defined as horizonalizing (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). A similar coding process, as explained in the interview analysis section occurred. Coding of the statements was done manually with hard and digital copies of the focus groups transcripts which allowed the researcher to mark up the transcript, add comments, and highlight details. During coding, I, as the researcher, used memoing to record my feelings, thoughts, and ideas. My memoing included “short phrases, ideas, or key concepts” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). Analytical memos also allowed the researcher to reflect and expound on the data (Saldaña, 2021).

Next, reduction and elimination of expressions of the participants during the focus groups took place (Moustakas, 1994). Commonalities were grouped as well as similarities in the data. When looking at the categorized focus group data, common themes emerged, and the researcher interpreted the data patterns. The common themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A final identification of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes occurred. Traditionally, individual textural and structural descriptions of the researcher’s experience would be collected (Moustakas, 1994); however, due to the researcher’s personal connection to the research, this was disclosed in a separate dissertation statement found in the role of the researcher section. Lastly, the textural and structural descriptions of the participants was developed, and the essence of the phenomenon noted in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Synthesis

The demographic survey, interview, focus group, and writing prompt data analysis was synthesized to create a “unified statement of the essences of the experience of the phenomenon as a whole” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 100). Integrating the textural and structural descriptions from the data collection created a narrative of the lived experiences of the participants. Using their survey information, voices alone (interviews), vocal group dialogs (focus groups), and personal reflections (writing prompts), I uncovered the essence of the experiences, major themes, and answered the central and subordinate research questions. The combination of the research participant data collection methods gave a holistic view of each participant, as well as how they relate to each other, and have experienced similar situations with online learning during their time spent in foster care. A single set of themes emerged from the synthesis of the data leading to the creation of a composite description of the group of participants. The essence of the phenomenon was accurately reported through description of the participant’s lived experiences.

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) use educational research to confirm the trustworthiness of research, specifically by defining credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability when conducting a natural inquiry study. This section uses the conceptual framework set forth by Lincoln and Guba to confirm validity of the study and assure the reader that all protocols and procedures have been considered to achieve a study which is valid, reliable, and objective. Each term is explored with evidence to substantiate the trustworthiness of the research. This section concludes with a focus on ethical considerations of my study.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the accuracy of the study’s findings resulting in a true and accurate description of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings of my study are trustworthy and

credible as evidenced by my use of triangulation (a), member checking (b), and peer debriefing (c) which are explained in detail below:

Triangulation

Triangulation is defined as the "use of multiple data sources and/or methods to measure a construct or a phenomenon in order to see if they converge and support the same conclusions" (Bickman & Rog, 2009, pp. 22-23). I have achieved triangulation in my research as evidenced by my data collection and analysis of first-person interviews, focus groups, demographic survey with lived experience, and writing prompts. Collecting the lived experiences of former foster students who participated in online education during a portion of their high school years in various forms of data, allowed integration of different research methods, strengthening my study. By collecting data through diverse methods, greater confidence was established in the findings of the research study (Bickman & Rog, 2009).

Member Checking

Member checking is an "important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do" (Maxwell, 2009, p. 245). Member checking during the study took place in two ways. Firstly, during the interview and focus groups, I restated what the participant said (as needed) to confirm that I understood what the full meaning of the statement reflected. The themes resulting from the interviews were re-visited in the focus groups questions to confirm continued applicability. Secondly, following the careful transcription of the interviews and focus groups with the participants, I requested that the individual participant read the transcription of their interview and their specific statements from the focus group. Participants confirmed accuracy of all personal statements. Member checking of the writing prompts did not require any participants to clarify their statements.

Peer Debriefing

Peer debriefing is defined as the "process of exposing oneself to a disinterested peer in a manner paralleling an analytic session" which also served the purpose of exploring aspects of the data with a third party (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 308). Speaking with my colleagues and an outside therapist about themes emerging from my data collection was an important way that I bracketed myself during the study and gained meaningful feedback from those well versed in research, yet not part of my study. Peer debriefing allowed me to be aware of my position during the data collection and analysis as well as defended the themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty which emerged. It also allowed me to review my potential bias and perspectives from my time spent in foster care and my current vocation as an online educator.

Transferability

Transferability demonstrates how the data can have pertinency to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). By providing a rich and thick description of my data and findings (Geertz, 1973) as well as the setting and participant details, I was able to provide the reader with a picture and narrative of the research findings. My participants represented various ethnicities as well as both female and male genders. Only the reader can make a judgement on the application and transferability of my data and participant lived experiences to other segments of the population, for example other vulnerable populations.

Dependability

Dependability of the research is evidenced in the way the findings are consistent and credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability of my study is demonstrated by the log of all research steps, researcher memos, and an external audit of my findings. My dissertation

committee, at Liberty University, had the opportunity to conduct an inquiry audit by way of a review of my processes and final product of my research.

Confirmability

Confirmability demonstrates the extent to which researcher bias has been removed, leaving findings that are derived from the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Neutrality is necessary to achieve confirmability and data driven research which is transparent. I utilized three techniques to achieve confirmability. Firstly, I demonstrated triangulation of my data as reviewed above. Secondly, I detailed all steps taken from the start of my research until the generation of the findings which is confirmed by way of an audit trail. Lastly, I acted in a reflexive manner. Reflexivity refers to the way the researcher positions themselves in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) which could impact the shape of the research. Through the process of bracketing, I created a reflexive journal which allowed me the opportunity to write down issues, clarify my value system, describe potential conflict, and recognize my feelings to enhance my reflexivity and demonstrate my bracketing (Ahern, 1999). This journal also contained my thoughts, reasonings, logistical planning, and potential biases when conducting my research. Lastly, I have noted and identified my personal time spent in foster care, my current position as an online educator, and my past teacher work history when describing myself as the researcher.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are employed when “the researcher considers and addresses all anticipated and emergent ethical issues in the study” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 48). Ethical considerations were reviewed and implemented during all stages of my research. All necessary approvals including Liberty University IRB approval were gathered prior to the start of the study. As Moustakas (1994) notes, making sure that all participants were willing to take part in

interviews which would be recorded and eventually the data published was imperative. Informed consent from adult participants (18 years or older) was collected before any data collection took place. All potential participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions of the researcher and understood the study topic and research questions. Risks, such as reminders of past potentially traumatic memories, and benefits, including the $25 gift card incentive were discussed with all participants. They were reminded that participation was voluntary and offered a referral to a professional counselor. No participants requested a professional counselor follow-up. Respect for the participants and their data necessitated providing privacy measures and ensuring consent to take place in the study as well as ability to withdraw from the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I, in no way, served in a supervisory or authority position over any of the participants. Due to the vulnerable population of participants, extreme sensitivity to their needs was considered during all parts of the research study. An incentive of a $25 gift card was provided to each participant at the completion of all four data collection events. Eight incentive cards were sent electronically (4 Walmart, 1 Target, 3 Amazon) to those eight participants that participated in all four parts of the research study.

All collected data was stored using appropriate and secure measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were made aware that all electronic files were password protected with the researcher being the only authorized password user. All paper files will continue to be stored in a locked file cabinet for 3 years, at which point the researcher will determine if the data should be destroyed or if the study will be extended. An explanation of confidentiality of participants stories, quotes, and phrases was reviewed. All participants were debriefed, with an emphasis on

my role as the researcher and a statement that the research meetings had ended. The debrief also included a reminder of the counselor referral.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. Through the collection of lived experiences of former foster students (aged 18-21) who had graduated (during 2021 or 2022) from or spent at least one year (defined as nine months consecutive or nonconsecutive) in a dedicated online high school, this research examined what sort of educational supports specific to the foster student population existed in online learning environments and the effect that those supports impacted feelings of belongingness, connection, and post-graduation success. Data collection through individual interviews, focus groups, and writing prompts provided robust information and experiences. Triangulation of the analyzed data was imperative to synthesizing emerging themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty. This research study reported accurate and trustworthy findings representative of the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. This study examined what sort of educational supports specific to the foster child population existed in online learning environments by way of collecting the voices of former foster students who participated in online education during high school for a period of time specified as at least nine academic months concurrently or non-consecutively during the grades of 9-12. The purpose of this chapter is to present the results of my data analysis as findings. This chapter includes participant descriptions by way of tables and descriptive information. This is followed by the results section which explains all themes and sub-themes supported by participant quotes. Next outlier data and findings are explained, followed by the research question responses, and lastly a summary.

Participants

Success was achieved in soliciting eleven final participants by way of foster care organizations distributing the IRB approved email and consent form, of which ten participants completed the research study. This study captured the lived experiences of former foster students in the United States who had graduated from online or in-person high school within academic years 2021 or 2022 resulting in an age range between 18-21. All participants experienced foster care during a period of time that included at least one high school year enrolled in a virtual learning program (defined as nine educational months concurrent or not concurrent during grades 9-12). All ten participants experienced a minimum of nine months of high school online learning while in foster care as a requirement of the study. Using a heterogeneous group (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of former foster students who had all participated in high school online education

offered lived experiences and first-person perspective on educational supports provided in online/virtual learning environments and feelings of connectedness and belongingness.

The final sample size of 10 participants was appropriate for a phenomenology study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of the study was to describe a “common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Participants included three male and seven female former foster students of a variety of self-reported ethnicities including Black, Caucasian, and Hispanic. Although the specific number of participants required when conducting a phenomenology can be varied, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend enough participants to reach a point of saturation. The idea of saturation demonstrates that the participant lived experiences are representative of the data and that no new aspects of the phenomenon would emerge given additional participants (Saunders et al, 2017). Saturation was achieved. To collect lived experiences, over-recruitment of 11 participants through purposive sampling took into consideration potential attribution and supplied a final sample size of 10 participants appropriate for a phenomenology study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ages of participants began at a minimum of 18 due to informed adult consent. To collect recent and relevant data, it was important to stay within the range of graduation from high school within the last three academic years (2020-2022), which would have resulted in an approximate age range falling between 18-23. Using the graduation and age criteria, the participants all graduated within the last two academic years 2021 and 2022. Six students graduated in 2021 while the remaining four participants graduated in 2022. The age range of the participants fell between 18-21 years of age. Seven students self-reported as female while the remaining three reported as male. The majority of the participants (five) reported their ethnicity as Black,

followed by three Caucasian students and two Hispanic students. Table 1 below conveys the distribution of the participants in regard to age, graduation year, gender, and race.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name	Age	Year Graduated	Gender	Race
Amanda	18	2022	Female	Caucasian
Bri	19	2022	Female	Black
Chad	20	2021	Male	Black
Dana	20	2021	Female	Caucasian
Ella	19	2022	Female	Black
Jeff	21	2021	Male	Black
Luis	20	2021	Male	Hispanic
Maya	19	2022	Female	Black
Natalie	19	2021	Female	Caucasian
Valeria	20	2021	Female	Hispanic

All study participants had varying relationships with online learning. As seen in Table 2 below, all participants experienced online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The amount of time spent using online learning platforms varied from nine-12 months with only one student graduating high school while fully online. Five participants transitioned back to in-person learning during their 12th grade year, while four participants were able to transition back to in-

person learning while in their 11th grade year. One participant, Valeria, graduated from high school while in a fully online program.

Table 2

Participant Online Learning while in Foster Placement Information

Participant Name	Months spent online learning in high school	Related to pandemic	Graduated from online learning	Grade transitioned to in-person
Amanda	9	yes	no	11th
Bri	11	yes	no	11th
Chad	9	yes	no	12th
Dana	11	yes	no	12th
Ella	9	yes	no	11th
Jeff	10	yes	no	12th
Luis	9	yes	no	12th
Maya	10	yes	no	11th
Natalie	10	yes	no	12th
Valeria	12	yes	yes	N/A

All of the participants were in foster care during their online learning time as well as at the time of graduation. As seen in Table 3 below, all participants had multiple placement changes while in foster care. Two participants had entered the foster care system as infants (less than one year old), while the remaining participants entered foster care during the ages of two-

ten. It is important to note that while some children enter foster care as infants, toddlers, or children, they are at times reunited with their families. However, they might go back into the foster care system, experiencing frequent movements back and forth, to family members and also to foster families or homes. The number of school changes during high school (defined as grades nine-12) was interesting to note because one would hope stability had been achieved when children had been in the foster system for a set amount of years; however, the data indicates that half of the participants moved families/foster placements while in high school.

Table 3

Participant Foster Placement Information

Participant Name	Age first entered foster care	Number of placements by range	Number of school changes during grades 9-12
Amanda	10	4-6	0
Bri	5	I don't remember	1
Chad	0	I don't remember	2
Dana	7	10-12	0
Ella	6	13 or more	0
Jeff	2	I don't remember	3
Luis	8	10-12	0
Maya	5	13 or more	2
Natalie	9	4-6	0

Valeria	0	I don't remember	1

All of the participants noted they were single. Two participants indicated they were parents, while the remaining eight stated they were not. All participants indicated that they were employed and three stated they were in a post-secondary program. Of those three, one was attending college full time, while the other two were attending college in a part-time capacity. No participants indicated that they were homeless or about to be homeless.

Results

This section will focus on the three main themes resulting from the research organized by theme with participant quotes which enforce the narrative of the result. The themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty were noted after careful transcription, evaluations, and analysis. These common themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A final identification of the invariant constituents and accompanying themes occurred. Lastly, the textural and structural descriptions of the participants were developed, and the essence of the phenomenon noted in the composite description (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All themes and sub-themes are explained in narrative form throughout this section.

Engagement Deficiency

Engagement deficiency was noted throughout interviews and focus groups with participants. They often explained feelings of social loss and connection to school loss. Two main sub themes emerged which will be explained below include loneliness and social engagement barriers. The essence of the engagement deficiency theme rests in feelings of inability to meaningfully participate with their peers and teachers in the school-based

community. Research indicates that foster children have difficulties forming strong connections with their schools, which hampers academic success (Johnson et al., 2012; Moyer & Goldberg, 2019) and lessens a feeling of school belongingness consistent with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Valeria reported feelings of inconsequence with school, stating "It didn't matter what I did, the teachers knew I was a senior and that we were graduating online. I think that the teachers kind of gave up and didn't try to encourage me to try." She also noted that the teachers "made it easy for me" when explaining that she did not feel held to a high standard because she was a foster student. She stated, "I used to have to work for my grade and now I could just show up." But showing up for Valeria, was simply logging in to her online course. When asked about using her camera for engagement purposes, she stated, "I didn't have to turn on my camera. None of us did." Reflecting on her online learning, she stated, "I did miss seeing my friends, or at least knowing other kids were in class." Without the teacher encouraging student to turn on cameras, multiple participants reported that showing up for class was pointless. Several participants felt similar to Valeria's comments, that teachers made the work easy, not simply because they were online learning, but because they were in foster care. No participants shared a support put in place to encourage engagement targeted to their foster care status.

Feelings of engagement deficiency were also noted by the participants regarding lack of teacher connection. Chad stated, "If I just logged into the Zoom class, I was good to go. I could play a game or get some food. No one knew that I wasn't paying attention and my foster mom never checked on me." Chad also explained that his grades had always been high A's and B's which he felt led his foster parents to not care what he was doing regarding school. They assumed that he was engaged and learning, but he explains it much differently. When asked about ways that the teacher would try to engage him, Chad stated, "There were some lame

games, like Kahoots, where the teacher did not even seem to know what was happening. They [student peers] would log in with all sorts of names and the teacher did not care." In addition to learning games that students did not feel part of, Maya reported, "I never felt like I was in a real class during COVID. I think this is because we didn't work together or do projects or anything." Many of the participants shared examples of teachers not using breakout rooms, using materials found online that did not align with the textbook, and the instruction typically not allowing time to share, present, or participate. No participants felt that any curricular work was modified, adjusted, or enhanced based upon their foster care status.

Loneliness

Participants noted feelings of loneliness and a common desire to participate in activities that were part of the school routine. Jeff stated, "Before COVID I played football. I would hang out with my team and see them in the hallways, but there was none of that online. No one could meet up." When asked about how football and foster care worked for Jeff he said, "Football was my thing. Even when I moved homes, I could play on the school team." Jeff found his engagement through sports and although he had entered foster care at the young age of two, he was able to keep football as his focus in high school, amidst his three foster care moves. Jeff did not care much about academics and stated, "I did the min [minimum] to get by to play. I didn't care about classes, I cared about my team." Without football, Jeff felt alone, without purpose, and disengaged from school, which was similar to how Amanda felt about lack of friendships. Amanda shared that her foster family had two other foster girls who were younger. She stated, "I couldn't stand them…and loved going to school to see my real friends. When I was stuck inside cause of COVID, I started feeling so low because I didn't have my friends." Amanda transitioned back to in-person learning in 11th grade and stated, "Those feelings [sadness and

loneliness] were gone! I was so happy to be around other people and not just my foster family. My friends made me feel loved, not those [foster family] people." Loneliness presented not only with sports and friendships, but also throughout stories told by other participants about their foster families. Many participants shared that they found their home at school with their people and community, but when they were solely with their foster family, they felt inferior and a lack of connection. The foster family did not fill the emptiness that the foster students felt when they could not go to school and see their peers.

Social Engagement Barriers

Barriers to social engagement were noted by all participants. In addition to difficulty communicating online, these barriers included cancellation of in-person school dances, sporting events, pep rallies, job fairs, career fairs, and other high school activities. Natalie stated, "They [the school] tried to do stuff online but it never worked. I didn't want to watch a pep rally online. That was stupid. And I really felt weird about talking with my teacher or friends over Teams." Natalie explained that one of her teachers used break out rooms and Natalie would often be in a room with students who were logged in but not actually there. She shared that they often would just wait until the breakout room time was done for class to resume. Looking back, she stated, "I could have done better. I could have tried, but it didn't really matter." Several participants shared common experiences of not having social pathways to enforce friendships, much less make new ones. They missed seeing each other in the hall, going to afterschool activities, and feeling part of their graduating class activities.

Inferior Educational Experiences

Over and again, participants noted that their grades did not matter and that the content was not rigorous at all during online learning. Given positive environments, foster students can

grow a feeling of grit and focus which propels them to succeed when so many other factors are out of their control. Grit and independence is evidenced in the drive some youth in foster care display through their desire to move on to college and/or career readiness programs, which can solidify as early as the middle school years (Jones & Dean, 2020). Forced online learning presented an environment that allowed many students to work minimally and still be rewarded with passing grades.

Maya spent 10 months online learning and transitioned back to in-person learning in 12th grade. She stated, "I moved around a lot! Some of my homes didn't care about me at all and were just happy to get me on the bus, but one family really showed me that I mattered." This situation was before COVID when Maya was learning in-person. She shared, "I remember the [foster] mom watching my grades and contacting teachers to tutor me." Maya went on to explain how this family and foster mother in particular gave Maya a reason to achieve and helped her feel that she could learn. Maya shared, "She [foster mother] told me I was smart. No one ever told me that before." When Maya left that family, she kept her grades up because she believed in herself and that with hard work she could achieve high grades. She had begun to take full ownership of her grades and academic future in high school. With the switch to online learning, Maya realized she did not need to push herself academically stating, "It was so easy to just do the form [Google Form] or look up the answers." Maya echoed concerns regarding online learning that other participants noted including being in online groups where there was often cheating and a feeling of educational futility.

Cheating

At first, during interviews, participants did not want to admit to cheating or taking advantage of the online system for education, but after opening up during personal interviews

and focus groups, several participants shared how and why they cheated. Dana stated, "No one was watching me. My foster parents were working downstairs and it was easy to look up the answers." Similarly, Bri shared, "My foster family could care less what I did in front of the computer, no one noticed and even my teachers couldn't stop me from opening tabs and cheating during a test." Foster students noted a lack of oversight during their time online learning. Sometimes this was because foster parents were working, or it was because the participants were in high school and expected to be able to do their own work without help. If there were younger students in the house, they often became the priority of the foster parents. Dana mentioned her little foster sister, stating that she "got all the attention." It was Dana's job to help the younger daughter get her work done, therefore it came naturally to Dana to do the minimum to get her own work done, since she was also in charge of someone else at home. Participants noted increased responsibility for the online learning of foster siblings in the home as a reason to invest less time into their own academic work.

Educational Futility

What Dana shared about taking care of another student in the household educationally was not an isolated incident. Other participants noted the need to take on more responsibility when the switch to online learning occurred. Many foster parents were working from home in a way that they had to relearn their own jobs, while also taking care of children at home. Participants shared how this extra burden [helping out with younger foster siblings] propelled them to spend less time on their work leading to a sense of educational futility. Ella noted, "I was taking care of three elementary school kids while my foster mom [a nurse] worked long shifts. I started trying to keep on top of my work and then I realized that my grades didn't go down much." Ella was describing that her teachers were not holding her accountable for the same

amount and rigor of work. Ella went on to share, “School felt pointless, and I could get by doing the minimum.” She needed more time in the day to help other children in the home and realized that her own education seemed futile because during the time of COVID she did not think it would end. For her and many other participants, a transition back to brick-and-mortar school occurred in 11th or 12th grade.

When participants went back to in-person school they reported feeling overwhelmed and the teachers not caring. This can be traced back to their feelings of educational futility when they were online learning. As Valeria summed up, “My teachers didn’t care about my grades or work, so why should I?” No participants reported that their foster family helped tutor them, work with them on assignments, or check their work while online learning. While the participants wanted to be back to in-person school, when they went back, they felt lost when it came to their grades, and no one (counselors, teachers, administration) checked in with them. Some participants expected help transitioning back to in-person learning and none reported any sort of supports put in place to help the transition

Feelings of Uncertainty

High school students are often concerned with what will happen after graduation, which leads to natural feelings of uncertainty. During the COVID-19 pandemic, problems for foster children were heightened by the switch to online learning. Although these changes led to feelings of isolation and uncertainty for many, for foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, a compounded situation unfolded (Blake et al., 2020). Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy affirms the need to have lower-level needs met in order to achieve self-actualization. For foster students, feelings of uncertainty can delay a natural progression to the love and belonginess level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943).

Participants noted strong feelings of uncertainty during online learning and for post-graduation plans. Jeff explained, “I didn’t know what was happening with COVID. Looking back, I didn’t think it was going to end. No one knew when we would get back to normal.” The ‘normal’ that Jeff references was a common theme with participants that was a missing part of their life and led to feelings of uncertainty. Ella noted, “I had no idea what I was going to do after high school, I was just trying to get by and do what I had to with each of my classes.” Looking back, she reflected on a comparison to a friend that graduated with only a few months of COVID online learning when she stated, “My friend graduated two years before me in 2020 when COVID started, but she already knew where she was going to college. I didn’t feel like I had options like her.” Ella’s feeling of post-high school uncertainty was compounded by the knowledge of what the ‘normal’ progression and resources for post-high school graduation plans were.

Participants noted that no specific foster care supports were available within the school for post-graduation planning. Amanda shared, “My case manager never talked to me about graduation. We had to do these stupid Zoom calls and check in, but really he just wanted to know I was passing my classes.” Students in foster care often have case managers to check in with them; however, school counselors are an excellent resource when graduation approaches. Without in-person learning, those meetings with counselors were also missing resulting in potential help with post-high school direction that high school seniors need.

Post-Graduation Plans

As Amanda and Ella shared above, what would happen after high school graduation seemed up in the air for many students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This continues to be particularly concerning for students in foster care, who traditionally have a low college

attendance rate. Research indicates that lacking supports for foster children, creates opportunity gaps which grow larger as the foster child rises through the grades which in turn greatly reduces the likelihood that foster children will graduate ready for college (Johnson & Strayhorn, 2019). At the time of her interview, Natalie was the only participant enrolled in a full-time college program. She had been able to access resources through her case manager as she transitioned out of high school to be able to live on campus and attend classes full time. She stated, “I always wanted to go to college. This was my chance to do something.” When asked about college planning in high school she noted a lot of challenges. The college fairs were over the Zoom and Teams platforms, and it felt “awkward” to have a one on one conversation with a college representative in a breakout room. She quickly “quit going to those” and instead focused on the application process. Fortunately, Natalie had a supportive case manager who gave her resources to move forward, but it was Natalie’s drive that helped her apply, gain acceptance, and move into her college dorm.

When asked about college and career resources during online high school, most participants laughed. Several were invited to mass online Zoom meetings for colleges and given online tests to help figure out their career fields, but there was no follow up from college counselors. Luis noted, “I didn’t do any of that stuff. It was a waste of my time.” I asked him to look back and share what would have been helpful as an online tool to help him succeed and he stated, “I needed to talk with someone and know that I had possibilities. No one told me I did.” Luis would later graduate in-person in 2021 and go directly into working for a fast-food restaurant full time which he had been working at part-time during high school. All participants were working in various positions at the time of the interview, mainly in food service and retail

industries. Natalie, who was enrolled full time in college, was working part time as a work-study component of her scholarship.

Unknown Timeline Concerns

The COVID-19 pandemic ending was something on the minds of all students often. Such an unknown and to date still impacting some institutions, COVID procedures and protocols uprooted systems that had been in place for decades. The feeling of unknown due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected several participants. Valeria shared, “I thought we were done with it [COVID]. I wanted to go back [to in-person school] and see my friends, but our school never took us back.” Valeria continued, “I ended up having a [live] streamed graduation ceremony where we drove through the school and got our diplomas.” Valeria expressed sadness about missing out on her graduation and not knowing when she would be able to be back with her friends. She shared, “The other schools went back in-person and had real graduations, but our school didn’t care.” Valeria’s negative thoughts towards her school including her statement that the school would never take students back evidence the futility caused by feelings of unknown timelines and general uncertainty.

Many participants took school policy personally believing that the school was not doing what was best for them and that the school did not care about them. Each week and month seemed to change policy which did not give participants a feeling of stability. Dana shared, “I couldn’t keep up with the changes. Sometimes mask on, sometimes hybrid class, sometimes get on the bus. It was all confusing.” The COVID timeline was never clear and left a feeling of uncertainty with the participants. Participants reported feeling lost about the timeline for their future due to not knowing when they would be able to attend school in-person again.

Outlier Data and Findings

An unexpected finding that did not align with my specific research questions and themes are presented below. It was noted by one participant that the transition back to in-person learning was very difficult and resulted in her asking to remain online. This finding will be explained below.

Outlier Finding

One student in the study shared that adjusting to in-person learning again was difficult and she wanted to stay at home. All other participants shared positive comments about returning to in-person instruction. Bri shared concerns, “When we were sent back to school, we had to wear masks. The teachers stood behind plexiglass, and I felt like I was in a hospital.” Bri asked her foster parents if she could take part in the online option for the school district; however, her foster parents worked outside of the household and said “No.” Bri asked her case worker and he also said “No.” Bri expressed frustration with adults making decisions for her by stating, “I feel like I never got to make my own choices or own my life. I hated being ‘the foster kid’ and people feeling pity for me. When I was online, I could hide.” It was surprising to hear the rest of the participants being happy to get back to see their friends and peers in school, while Bri was more interested in learning alone at home.

Research Question Responses

This section offers answers to the study research questions as supported with participant responses. In addition to the themes which emerged from the research, each research question was answered with respondent support.

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of former foster students who have spent time learning through online educational platforms/schools? The participants’ perspectives overall were that online

learning was a negative experience. Feelings of loss, isolation, futility, and uncertainty riddled the personal narratives. Maya stated, "I feel like that was a wasted school year plus some of the next one. I don't think I learned much, and I missed my friends." Maya's feelings ring true to all the participants that learning was compromised, social interactions were unavailable, and a feeling of loneliness similar to the abandonment that foster children often feel was realized. Forming friendships, close acquaintances, and finding a place in a group all help to solidify and meet love and belongingness needs (Crandall et al., 2019). When the ability to make close friendships and participate with peers is interrupted by online learning, achieving Maslow's (1943) hierarchy love need is impacted. Participants all focused on the adverse effects of online learning and how it negatively impacted their lives while in foster care.

Sub-Question One

How do students who have experienced foster care form connections with peers and adults through online learning? Participants noted that social media and texting kept connections with peers somewhat alive; however, not in a positive learning way. Dana stated, "During online lessons I would text my friends and make fun of the class. We wouldn't pay attention and instead just comment on what was happening." Participants noted that they did not form connections with teachers because one on one time was not face to face and it was easy to hide behind the screen. Jeff stated, "Sure, there were help times, but I never went. I was passing so I didn't need to talk to the teacher." Participants also noted that there was no contact with the principals, only sporadic emails from school counselors, and very little group interactions. In order to achieve Maslow's (1943) love level within the hierarchy, which would correlate with positive interactions and communication with peers and teachers online, safety and physiological needs must be adequately met before a sense of belongingness is achieved (Maslow, 1943).

Participants consistently shared feelings of uncertainty impacting the level of safe they felt in their currently placement due to unknown educational factors impacted by COVID-19 such as return to in-person school timeline, mask mandates, and when school activities/extra curriculars would restart.

Elective interests also diminished. Chad stated, “Band was my favorite class because I got to play with my friends.” However, with the switch to online learning, he shared, “Online band was a mess. It made no sense and the band director didn’t really try. All I did was play along with a recording while everyone was muted.” Chad had originally loved his band class and felt comradery with many of his peers, but once online learning started, playing music didn’t appeal to him. He ended up dropping band his senior year when people were back in-person and currently doesn’t play his trumpet anymore. Chad’s lack of connection with his peers and teacher during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted his continuation of music and the joy he felt being part of an ensemble.

Maya shared, “If you had friends before you were okay.” She noted that new students could not make friends at her online school because people rarely showed up on camera. She said she was fortunate to have a few friends that she used to talk in class and walk together in the hallways that she would text during online class. She stated, “I feel like they were all I had of school.” She went on to explain that her previous connections made in-person at school really helped her get through the difficult online learning time. None of the participants acknowledged any sort of special supports given to them due to being in foster care. Participants noted that they were treated equally with their non-foster care peers and never given special opportunities or check in times.

Sub-Question Two

How do students who have experienced foster care perceive online learning environments (positively, negatively, and/or comparatively with their personal brick and mortar experience)? Participants noted a negative association with online education as compared to in-person instruction. However, after the return to in-person instruction, several noted that they missed the convenience of online classes, not having to get dressed in the morning, and the ability to watch recordings of the classes when doing homework or taking a test. Maya stated, “Sure it was nice not having to turn on my camera and really be there during class, but I wouldn’t want to do online all the time. I didn’t learn anything, and I didn’t get to see my friends.” Maya’s statement is echoed by the other participants who enjoyed some of the ease of online learning, but overall missed their social connections and friends.

Sub-Question Three

How do former foster students feel that online education prepared them for post high school graduation? Participants reported that their high school offered very little preparation and help to plan for graduation and beyond. A few participants noted virtual career fairs, college fairs, and conversations with their case managers, but otherwise felt that it was awkward to talk to the career and college representatives one on one in a breakout room. Natalie did have help from her case manager. She stated, “The school did very little. I had to do the work and find the schools. Just getting a fee waiver took a ton of emails.” Natalie fortunately had the help of her case manager and her own drive to succeed, but the majority of respondents did not attend college following high school. Jeff noted a special person as his Spanish teacher that encouraged him to start working in high school. Jeff shared, “Before COVID, he [Spanish teacher] always went to the football games and would talk to me after class. He knew I was a foster kid, but I never felt him judging me for it.” Jeff went on to explain the impact the teacher had on his post-

graduation plans. He shared, "He [Spanish teacher] talked with me and told me that I could work my way up at the restaurant and become a manager. He knew I didn't want to go to college, so he didn't push me." This teacher is an excellent example of the impact from getting to know a student, checking in with them, and also making a positive impact.

Summary

The dominate themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty were noted after careful transcription, evaluations, and analysis of participant data. These common themes were used to create the textural descriptions of the participants lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions of the participants were developed, and the essence of the phenomenon noted in the composite description of each theme and research question response (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were able to share their experiences of high school learning while online in foster care. These experiences were predominately viewed as negative when compared with in-person learning. Participants were unable to form strong connections to peers and teachers during online learning but, in comparison, did offer examples of positive relationships during in-person instruction. Overall, participants did not feel prepared or ready for life after graduation in regard to college and work. All but one participant was able to experience some in-person learning prior to graduation which allowed them the ability to reflect and compare the time spent online to that in-person. Ella summed up her feelings about online education which was echoed by many participants, "I had no idea what I was going to do after high school, I was just trying to get by and do what I had to with each of my classes." Online learning featured new challenges and few opportunities for the participants while they were in foster care. No special or targeted supports

from the school due to their foster care status were noted by any of the participants during online education.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. This study examined what sort of educational supports specific to the foster child population existed in online learning environments by way of collecting the voices of former foster students who participated in online education during high school for a period of time specified as at least nine academic months concurrently or non-consecutively during the grades of 9-12. The purpose of this chapter is to conclude my research and present the reader with my interpretations and ideas regarding the findings. This chapter will discuss my interpretation of findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of this section is to discuss my study's findings in light of the developed themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty of foster students in online environments. Through the lived experiences of my participants, I was able to glean an understanding of the missing supports in online learning which could have helped this specific population. This chapter will discuss my interpretation of these findings, implications for policy and practice, theoretical and methodological implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Interpretation of Findings

This section will begin with a brief Summary of Thematic Findings as discussed in Chapter Four themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of

uncertainty of foster students in online environments. This will be followed by a series of significant interpretations rooted in the interviews, focus groups, and other data collection from the participants lived experiences.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Participants shared freely their feelings about online learning while in foster care, how online learning impacted their connection to their peers and adults, and the resulting impact on their future. Themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty of foster students in online environments resulted. Engagement deficiency included feelings of social loss and connection to school loss. Inferior educational experiences presented in each of the lived experiences often with feelings that grades did not matter and that the content was not rigorous during online learning. Feelings of uncertainly abounded for participants regarding what would happen after graduation and when would they be back in-person to learn. During the COVID-19 pandemic, foster students who have experienced trauma, abuse, and instability, experienced a compounded situation (Blake et al., 2020). Taking into account foster care transitions, feelings of abandonment from moving away from biological parents, and previous feelings of instability, changes resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic heightened many of these same feelings in the educational platform for foster students.

Enhanced Feelings of Loss. Foster children are removed from their biological home, placed with foster parents, and sometimes moved to a new school district (Font et al., 2018; Harris, 2011; Kernan & Lansford, 2004). These changes result in loss of friendships, loss of connection with family members, and loss of a semblance of security. Research indicates that the effects of separation, the timing of separation, disruptions with multiple caregivers, and especially the contributions given by foster parents could all have an impact on attachment for foster children (Stovall & Dozier, 1998). With the switch to online learning, this specific population felt the

changes in an enhanced way, meaning that they were already sensitive to feelings of loss, may or may not have coping mechanisms in place, and were somewhat used to abrupt change. While this previous knowledge of how to succeed amidst multiple difficulties and challenges could have propelled them to easily adapt to online learning, all participants relayed an overall negative experience.

Ella stated, "I didn't have anyone and worse I had to take care of the others [foster siblings from the biological parents]." Ella's shared feelings of isolation and loss. School was a safe place for her that removed her from the foster home and allowed her to have connections with friends and teachers. Not only were foster students forced to online learn, but it was done in the foster home environment which presented several challenges with other children learning at home and some foster parents working from home. One might think with all of these people in a location, no one would feel lonely or a loss because they would be surrounded by others at all times; however, participants responded that they were left to their own work with little oversight or help. Dana stated, "I could text my friends, but that was about it. I couldn't see them, visit them, or do school with them cause they weren't in my classes." In addition to the loss of her friendships, she noted her foster family, "…didn't care. They were too worried about their jobs and their work that they left me alone to do my thing." Several moving parts of foster parent employment, foster sibling school, and operating as a family unit without the ability to leave the residence added a burden.

Participants reported feeling alone, responsible for other young foster siblings in the home, and not parented. Multiple participants noted that their role changed from student to caregiver for younger children. Ella stated, "I was taking care of three elementary school kids while my foster mom [a nurse] worked long shifts." Were Ella's basic needs being met or was

she being used as an extra caregiver in the house? Maslow's (1943) hierarchy affirms the need to have lower-level needs met in order to achieve higher levels such as feelings of love and belongingness. This could be difficult if basic safety and security needs are not met by the adult at home/foster placement. For foster students, feelings of uncertainty can delay a natural progression to the love and belonginess level of the hierarchy (Maslow, 1943). Research indicates that for foster children to feel a sense of belonging, the foster parent(s) must create a normal and sustained family environment as well as provide consistent support (Steenbakkers et al., 2021). The loss of in-person school paralleled a loss with relationships that foster students repeatedly noted was extremely important to their routine. All participants had a positive view of school in-person as a way to interact with others and sometimes leave the stigma that comes along with being in foster care; however, they had negative views of online education.

Educational Complacency. Participants were bold and self-assured when reporting cheating during online education. While some participants held back during focus group conversation about the topic, eventually they shared their experiences with looking up answers or using online sources without citations. Amanda stated, "It was easy finding the answer and no one was watching." Maya shared, "I kept doing it because no one noticed, and I got my work done faster." The participants seemed to stop caring about their grades because of feelings of uncertainty as well as a lowered rigor in their online educational programs. As Maya shared, people were not noticing. Many participants were completing school assignments in their room, at their own pace, alone. Research indicates that supportive foster parents can play an important communicative role in helping foster students talk about their worries, past, and concerns which allow them to share in a safe environment (Steenbakkers, 2016). However, the participants, were

not being watched by their teachers or their foster parents, which resulted in lowered educational accountability.

Research indicates that meaningful relationships with adults, help foster students advance better than those without (Ahmann, 2017). Given positive, nurturing home environments with engaged foster parents, foster students can grow a feeling of educational accountability which propels them to succeed when many other factors feel out of their control. The switch to online learning presented an environment that allowed many students to work minimally, look up answers, and become complacent with their grades, since several students reported grade inflation. Jeff, who enjoyed playing football prior to the season being cancelled due to COVID, stated, “I always had to think about my grades because my grades let me play.” Jeff was aware of the school policy in regard to passing grades to be able to participate in sports activities. He went on to say, “When the games were canceled, we didn’t work out, and we stopped caring about class, but my grades didn’t dip.” Jeff seemed surprised that he did not need to work hard for his grades and instead he could often take repeat tests where he could simply look up the answers online.

Jeff said, “The teachers made it easy to pass.” Other participants reported feelings of educational rigor being reduced by teacher, which when coupled with cheating, kept grades inflated. Valeria shared feelings of inconsequence with school, stating “It didn’t matter what I did, the teachers knew I was a senior and that we were graduating online. I think that the teachers kind of gave up and didn’t try to encourage me to try.” She also noted that the teachers “made it easy for me” when explaining that she did not feel held to a high standard because she was a foster student. Educational complacency resulted in a mix of foster student cheating, lack of foster parental oversight, and reduced teacher expectations.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Foster students learning online can benefit from multiple supports, strategies, and targeted policies put into place to encourage academic success. This section will detail ways that school districts can put into place policy directly related to baseline testing for new online foster students and targeted social emotional learning opportunities implemented in small groups as well as classroom environments. Practices for individual teachers and counselors are also outlined below with opportunities for fostering a sense of belongingness and connection in the online environment for foster students.

Implications for Policy

School district policy and procedures must change to help support the needs of foster students during online instruction. The lack of online educational supports, which were absent for all participants in this research study, indicates a need for change. Policy regarding foster students currently is up to the individual school district with only a small amount of geographical tracking oversight by Department of Education. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (known as the Chafee Act) provides public funding and services for youth transitioning out of foster care (Shirk & Stangler, 2004) as well as requires the use of a data collection tool to track services for foster youth (Fernandes-Alcantara, 2019). This data collection tool, known as the National Youth in Transition Database, was created in 2010 by the Children's Bureau (2021) and continues to track information including race, ethnicity, date of birth, sex, and foster care status of youth in foster care. This data collection is general in nature and not tied to the academic success, grades, or meaningful connection of foster youth with their school. Outcomes, such as employment status, experiences with homelessness, incarceration, and enrollment in an

educational program for former foster youth who have aged out of the foster care system are also collected (Children's Bureau, 2021).

While collecting geographical and demographic information of foster students to be able to track their changes from school to school is important, what would be more meaningful is tracking the growth of the foster student by way of a nation policy implemented to encourage success for all students in foster care and aging out of foster care. A system could be in place to signal to the school district when a foster student enrolls, to automatically have baseline academic testing and screening for learning gaps. Due to moving schools and neighborhoods, children in foster care experience instability (Sandh et al., 2020) and learning gaps (Clemens & Sheesley, 2016) which set them back educationally (Johnson et al., 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Specifically, for online schools having baseline testing data could help ensure that foster students are placed in appropriate classes, at the correct grade level, and given supports to maintain a successful path towards graduation.

Policy level changes should also include the need to offer supports such as specific social emotional learning plans put into place. Social emotional learning refers to a process to help students and adults develop skills to manage relationships, emotions, and personal identity (CASEL, 2007). This policy could encourage foster students to assimilate with their peers, find meaningful relationships at school, and feel part of the learning community.

Implications for Practice

Stability is a solid predictor of success (Shirk & Stangler, 2004) and can be evidenced in the home environment and learning environment for the student. Online educators should be given tools to help foster a genuine sense of stability for students identified in foster care.

Identification of their foster status communicated to a teacher should not be a stigma, but instead used as a tool to help teacher individualize learning for the student.

Professional development for online educators could include topics such as at-risk and vulnerable populations, including foster students. Giving educators the tools to implement supports specific to the needs of foster students early and often may lead to educational success. Acknowledgement that foster students face an array of obstacles is necessary when constructing educational supports (Cox, 2013). Palmieri & LaSalle's (2017) research recognize that foster children have unique needs which necessitate educational resources to provide support to reduce absenteeism and behaviors which lead to detention and suspension. Online education is especially important in consideration of attendance and absenteeism issues due to the ease of moving from one online school to another. Identifying the unique needs of the foster child and enacting supports to meet those needs (Scherr, 2007) can accomplish success in the online classroom.

In addition to practice recommendations for teachers, Palmieri and Salle (2016) recommend that school counselors and psychologists need to be aware of different ways that behaviors present in foster children and note the connection between poor behaviors and academic distress. This too can be accomplished by way of targeted professional development opportunities for online counselors, social workers, and psychologists. Research suggests that integrating social and emotional learning (SEL) for children in foster care raises their awareness of positive behaviors and helps to self-manage their emotions (Palmieri and Salle, 2016). Being able to manage emotions appropriately in the online classroom environment enhances successful learning, thus encouraging students to feel a sense of school and community belonging found in Maslow's (1943) third hierarchy level.

Additionally, implementing structural changes is necessary to connect K-12 schools, social services, and higher education (Jones & Dean, 2020). Working as a team (including school counselors, psychologists, teachers, school staff, and foster parents) can help students in foster care feel a sense of belongingness and feel supported in their online education. Research indicates that initiating mentoring relationships for foster children with a safe adult can encourage success (Lee & Morgan, 2016). Online schools can assign a peer ambassador to help the new foster student acclimate to the online school. School counselors can also host online peer groups of new students and/or foster students via break out rooms in Zoom to allow sharing, a sense of camaraderie, and encourage relationship building.

It is important that schools provide a comprehensive range of supports while simultaneously avoiding particular focus on the label of foster child, to avoid a stigmatizing effect (Palmieri & Salle, 2016). The stigmatizing effect can be reduced by teachers not sharing the status of a new foster student, and only recognizing their foster care status by way of a school data collection program. Group bonding due to foster care status can be carefully orchestrated by school counselors after meaningful conversations with the students themselves to achieve a sense of if the student would like to have peer support from other foster students or would prefer to only engage with their peers as a student without foster label. A feeling of belonginess and school connectedness could be cultivated in schools by way of encouraging meaningful relationships with adults in school and during extracurricular activities (Somers et al., 2019). When teachers understand the unique needs of foster students in an online environment they are better prepared to individualize instruction and help those student succeed. Again, professional development opportunities to learn more about needs and potential supports to put in place for the foster student population could lead to teachers feeling more confident to create and maintain

appropriate relationships with foster students. Meeting Maslow's (1943) belonginess level of the hierarchy can help students to move onto the esteem level and cultivate feelings of accomplishment.

Lastly, tutoring programs can help to address the educational gaps and grade retention issues for foster children (Männistö & Pirttimaa, 2018; Scherr, 2007). Online tutoring can be included into the schedule during the day or pre/post school day. Offering a free public school tutoring program online can help students become more comfortable with online classes, meet other students in small group opportunities, and receive targeted instruction to address their learning gaps. Outside support programs can also provide needed educational tutoring in the online setting. Full year and multiple year school readiness programs to support foster children require sustained financial investment by community and government entities to be successful and ongoing (Lynch et al., 2017), which necessitates a community approach to focusing on the specific needs of foster students. Another approach within the online community could be relationships with colleges through online platform to provide supports and pathways to higher education. Miller et al., (2019) note that university sponsored programs are an important support for former foster students. Overall, making sure that online faculty, staff, counselors, family mentors, and administration are informed about the specific needs are given professional development workshops consisting of strategies and way to implement supports for foster youth may help to support success.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

This section addresses the theoretical and empirical implications of my study. Theoretically, this study utilized Maslow's (1943) hierarchy to investigate the impact of feelings of belongingness in the online school setting for students in foster care. This study confirmed

through lived experiences that feelings of belongingness were often absent in learning environments. The empirical implication of this study adds to the literature of phenomenological research by giving a voice to former foster students with a specific focus on online educational experiences. Due to a gap in the literature, it is important to acknowledge and research the impact of online education for this specific population.

Theoretical Implication

The theoretical significance of this study uncovers how the needs of foster students align with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy and how the hierarchy impacts feeling of belongingness in the online school setting. This study confirmed through lived experiences that feelings of belongingness were often absent in learning environments. All participants experienced significant negative feelings about connection with the school when participating in online learning. Foster students did not feel connected to school, frequently did not turn on their camera if not required during class, and rarely met with their online teachers for one-on-one sessions. This is novel information due to the gap in the literature regarding how foster students learn online. Feelings of educational futility propelled disassociation with the online school when rigor and expectations online did not correlate with typical in-person education.

When children are living in challenging situations such as poverty, meeting basic physiological needs is difficult (Noltemeyer et al., 2020) and causes an inability to focus on meeting higher educationally related needs such as Maslow's (1943) belongingness level. The lived experiences of the participants uncovered challenges such as taking care of younger siblings, inability to participate in extracurricular activities, and feelings of loneliness when locked down in their foster care home. Basic care needs may have been present, such as running water, food, and shelter; however, the emotional availability of the foster parents was not, often

due to reported changes in work schedules and the learning curve resulting from working at home in a business sector which was traditionally in an office. High school foster students reported a lack of oversight not online from their online teachers, but also from their foster parents. The resulting mix left them feeling alone and unconnected with their school.

Using the theoretical framework of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs to support foster children, this study adds to the research investigating how to best support foster students learning and obtaining a sense of belongingness in their online school. Foster students need to not only have support at home, but especially at school, which should be a constant in their routine. The online school can offer support groups, tutoring opportunities, and also financial support (in the way of gift cards at holidays and food vouchers throughout the year) to help foster students maintain equal footing with their peers. Once basic needs and safety needs are satisfied, online students may flourish educationally and form a sense of belongingness with their school by way of teacher and peer interactions and connections.

In addition to Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs framework utilized in this student, future research could also use Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory as a framework to associate or disassociate feelings of attachment or abandonment with the ways foster students felt moving from in-person learning to online learning. Several participants voiced concerns about feeling alone and unheard. They felt a sense of loneliness stemming from lack of engagement in person with their school friends and teachers. They felt unheard in class because of a futility feeling of education having no importance. In the future, combining the two frameworks for research opportunities to investigate online learning for foster students could focus more specifically on where feeling of loneliness stem and if prior trauma led to feelings of disengagement online with education. The lived experiences of the participants diverge from Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of

needs in respect to sometimes physical and safety needs being met, but emotional and social basic needs not being met and how this impacts feelings of belongingness and love during the COVID-19 pandemic. Without knowing in advance that all participants would encounter online learning due to requirement/force instead of choice, this study could have rested more on Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory. Future research could compare groups of students in foster care that chose online learning versus those that the foster parents made the choice or a similar situation as the COVID-19 pandemic decided the shift to online learning.

Empirical Implication

The empirical implication of this study adds to the literature of phenomenological research by giving a voice to former foster students with a specific focus on online educational experiences. Due to a gap in the literature, it is important to acknowledge and research the impact of online education for this specific population. The transcendental phenomenological research approach used in this study collected the lived experiences of a heterogeneous group by way of surveys, in depth and descriptive interview questions, focus groups, and writing prompts to explore the phenomenon and report emerging themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). Other phenomenology studies rich with descriptive interview responses such as Jones and Dean (2020) allow former foster students to reflect on their previous experiences and share their perspectives. My study achieved similar results of reflection since all participants at the time of interviews had graduated from school and were able to look back on their time online learning as well as compare it to their brick-and-mortar experience.

This study diverges from the current research by adding additional former foster student voices to the literature who experienced online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. While not fully intended, this study did allow participants who experienced online education due

to the pandemic. A novel appearance early on during recruitment, was that all participants experienced online education due to the pandemic; however, only one student graduated from an online learning environment. Although many studies focus on transition experiences and post-secondary education, this study presents unique findings specific to online education perspectives of former foster students.

Limitations and Delimitations

Delimitations of this study revolve around the timeframe of the study, with specific focus on the COVID-19 pandemic. While it would be interesting to compare foster students that by choice attended online school versus those that were forced by the pandemic, the COVID-19 pandemic established that all participants would have easily met the requirement of attending school online for nine months. Most schools were shut down for in-person learning and many schools utilized various platforms to provide an online educational platform for their students. The COVID-19 pandemic was out of the control of my research and dictated that all of the participants had experienced the required nine months of online education. Experiencing online education was a constant for the participants. At this time, given the pandemic, I believe that it would have been more difficult to locate participants who had online learned by choice while in foster care.

Limitations of this study include specifications of the sample population. Participant ages and year of graduate were requirements due to the relevant reflection on time spent online learning. As people mature their memory might change, modify, or not have accurate representations of past events, therefore I set my age range between 18-21. I also requested students who had graduated within the last three calendar years from my initial interviews. Both of these factors limited the pool of participants. Approximately 20,000 youth age out of the

foster care system typically at the age of 18 (Amechi, 2021) resulting in an estimated sample population of 120,000 former foster students meeting the study age range criteria. Of these students, it was approximated that at least 40,000 former students experienced at least nine months of high school online education predominantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These anticipated students in the sample pool would have graduated from high school in 2021 and 2022.

This study participant pool was not contingent upon online education resulting from the pandemic; however, population numbers were estimated due to resulting circumstances. Due to the nature of students in foster care, being able to obtain parental permission while they were in care and under the age of 18 would have been difficult due to legal consent. Reliance upon students that had already graduated was necessary for this study; however, could present a weakness, as the memory or comparison of online education with that of in-person education may not be fully accurate.

Recommendations for Future Research

After completing my research, I find that more targeted research should continue for the specific population of foster students. While much research is written regarding transition from high school to college for foster students, research of foster children in K-12 education is lacking. I would recommend not only further and in-depth study of supports in place for foster students in-person and online, but case studies completed showcasing programs and initiatives which support foster students.

I also believe that, following the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning is here to stay. Educators need to be ready, able, and prepared to instruct in-person and online. Further research into how teachers feel prepared to instruct online with regard to specific vulnerable populations

would be interesting. Given professional development opportunities or lack thereof could impact how educators are able to meet the needs of marginalized populations. Foster students are only one subset of vulnerable populations but could be a focus of targeted supports and programs put into place. Viewing the growth and change academically by way of baseline test scores and final existing test scores might demonstrate the impact of targeted supports and programs for foster students. Foster students can also be compared to their peers (whether online or in-person) regarding academic success, feelings of connection and belongingness, and post-graduation attainment by way of various research studies.

Research on the impact of SEL (social and emotional learning) initiatives for foster students online might also be a great idea to explore for future research. School counselors can be key stakeholders in the education of foster students. They could create support groups as well as teach lessons in core content classes which focus on SEL. These SEL concepts can then be utilized by the classroom teacher on a daily basis to help gauge the feelings of the foster children. With such data, engagement options could be developed, and research-based techniques could be published and implemented.

Overall, foster students are underrepresented in the current literature. While online learning is my topic and passion, many other research opportunities exist with the ability to obtain permission for foster students in research studies. Professional development workshops could also be studied for effectiveness when targeted to the specified population. In-person, online, and hybrid educational vehicles could be studied with regard to foster student participation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of former foster students in online educational environments. Maslow's hierarchy of needs acted as the theory guiding this study. This study was designed to answer the following central research question: What are the experiences of former foster students who have taken part in online education? Using a transcendental phenomenological approach, I collected the lived experiences of the participants to uncover emerging themes during online learning while in foster care. A sample of 10 former foster students who experienced online education while in foster care and graduated from high school during the academic years 2021 or 2022 resulted in a participant age range of 18-21 years old. To facilitate triangulation, data collection included surveys, interviews, writing prompt documents, and focus groups. Data analysis followed Moustakas' modification of the van Kaam method to horizontalize the data, cluster common experiences, and develop textural and structural descriptions of the essence of the phenomenon. The themes of engagement deficiency, inferior educational experiences, and feelings of uncertainty for high school foster students engaged in online learning also included feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and post-graduation apprehension. Foster students learning online shared negative experiences including ease of cheating, non-engagement, and feelings of isolation. Foster students, due to their transient nature, need targeted educational supports put into place when learning online to succeed with coursework, become college/career ready, and to engage with peers forming a sense of connection with their school community. Future research of professional development opportunities offered to online teachers, counselors, and administrators may highlight how to support the future success of online foster students.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 25, 2022

Tiffany Beckwith
Patricia Ferrin

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1212 A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMER FOSTER CARE STUDENTS LEARNING THROUGH ONLINE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

Dear Tiffany Beckwith, Patricia Ferrin,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) 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(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at (removed for publication).

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What are the experiences of former foster students who have spent time learning through online educational platforms/schools?

Sub-Question One

How do students who have experienced foster care form connections with peers and adults through online learning?

Sub-Question Two

How do students who have experienced foster care perceive online learning environments (positively, negatively, and/or comparatively with their personal brick and mortar experience)?

Sub-Question Three

How do former foster students feel that online education prepared them for post high school graduation?

Appendix C

Individual Interview Questions

1. To begin, would you tell me more about yourself and your household? (CRQ)
2. Would you tell me more about your experience in cyber/online school? (CRQ)
3. How long were you enrolled? (SQ2)
4. Why were you enrolled? (SQ2)
5. How did your choice play into being enrolled? (SQ2)
6. What type of school did you attend prior? (SQ2)
7. How did you feel about changing/transitioning to an online school? (SQ2)
8. Had you ever been in cyber school prior to high school? (SQ2)
9. What are your thoughts about how you felt connected to your peers in cyber school? (SQ1)
10. Did you or did you not feel connected to your teachers in cyber school and follow up question of why. (SQ1)
11. Can you tell me about how a special person (teacher, counselor, administrator) at the cyber school who helped you? (SQ1)
12. As a former foster-student, what do you feel the online environment did, educationally, to help you succeed? (SQ3)
13. From the point of view of a foster care student, do you feel the online school went above and beyond to meet your needs and do you feel that this effort exceeded the effort put forth to address your peers' needs? Were you involved in any special programs or support groups? (SQ2 & SQ3)

14. Can you explain why the transition from a brick-and-mortar school to a cyber school occurred? (CRQ)
15. How do you feel about the transition? (SQ1)
16. What support systems at the online school do you think helped you? (SQ2)
17. Did you feel that anything, either educationally or socially, was missing that could have helped you succeed in online learning which you saw presented to your peers? (SQ3)

Appendix D

Focus Group Questions

1. You have all experienced part of your high school education in an online environment. Would you please share one of the positive experiences that online education provided? (SQ2).
2. As a former foster care student, you have experienced moves between homes, placements, and possibly schools. When thinking back to the transition from in-person learning to virtual learning, can you share your feelings on the transition? (I will prompt with examples if participants do not begin, such as “scared,” “concerned,” “anxious,” “annoyed,” etc.) (CRQ & SQ2)
3. How did you feel about sharing your status as a foster care student? What was the impact of others knowing your status? (CRQ & SQ1)
4. What role did your caretaker play in your virtual education? (SQ1)
5. Did you feel connected to the online school? What helped you feel connected? *If respondents proceed with negative statements, I will ask the question*, What ways could the school have made you felt connected? (SQ1)
6. How did online education help you after graduation? What would have helped you succeed after graduation, which was lacking at your online school? (SQ3)

Appendix E

Writing Prompt Questions

Sent via Google Form

1. When I was at my online school, one adult who made me feel welcome was ________________. Please describe this person. I felt this way because _____________. (SQ1)
2. When I transferred to my online school, I was concerned about _________________. I was able to overcome this challenge by _________________________ OR I was not able to overcome this concern because ___________________________. (CQ & SQ2)
3. I felt supported in my academic career at my online school because ___________________. (CQ & SQ2)
4. One example of my online school supporting my plan for graduation is _____________________. (SQ3)
5. Online education gave me the tools to be able to do ____________________ after graduation. (SQ3)

Appendix F

Participant Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Study of The Lived Experiences of Former Foster Care Students Learning Through Online Educational Environments
Principal Investigator: Tiffany Beckwith, MS Instructional Leadership, MEd Special Education, Doctoral Student at Liberty University's School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and have graduated from high school in 2020, 2021, or 2022. You must have spent at least 9 months, consecutively or nonconsecutively, during the high school grades of 9-12 in a virtual learning environment, such as a cyber-school, while you were in foster care. This time spent in an online school/cyber school may or may not be due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of former foster care students in online educational environments. The study seeks to understand the perceived supports in place or not existing for foster children in online educational environments through the lived experiences of former foster care students (aged 18+) who have graduated from or spent at least one school year (defined as nine months consecutively or nonconsecutively) in a dedicated online high school. Brick-and-mortar schools, which transitioned to online-learning due to COVID, will be considered online-learning environments.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, the researcher will ask you to do the following things:

1. Complete an online survey, via a Google Form, which will capture your demographic information and take approximately 10 minutes. It will be mainly multiple choice with short answer responses for your name and location information.
2. Participate in one, approximately 45-60 minute-long, interview which will be recorded over the Zoom platform or another similar online platform (Teams/Google Meet).
3. Participate in one focus group, lasting an estimated 45-60 minutes, with 5-10 other participants through an online platform similar to the interview.
4. Complete a short writing prompt sent through a Google Form (consisting of 5 open-ended questions). Writing prompt completion time will vary with a forecasted time of 20-30 minutes.
5. Review the interview and focus group transcripts for accuracy.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include sharing your story to potentially improve online education environments for other students in foster care as well as bringing about awareness of helpful supports for students in foster care who are learning through online environments.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life. However, the sharing of memories from your time spent in foster care may be triggering to some participants.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted and recorded through an online platform, such as Zoom, with the researcher in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Participant data will be stored on a password-locked computer and in a locked filing cabinet. The data may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all physical records will be shredded.
- Interviews and focus group sessions 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.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Upon completion of all of the procedures listed above, participants will receive a virtual $25 gift card to either Walmart, Target, or Amazon (participant's choice). Email addresses will be requested for compensation purposes; however, they will remain confidential with the other study data collected.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide 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.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Tiffany Beckwith and you may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at (removed for publication). You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Patricia Ferrin at (removed for publication).

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

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, (removed for publication), VA 24515 or email at (removed for publication).

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

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- and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

____

Printed Subject Name

____

Signature & Date

Liberty University IRB-FY21-22-1212 Approved on 8-25-2022

Appendix G

Social Media Approved Recruitment Posts

Facebook

ATTENTION FORMER FOSTER CARE STUDENTS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of former foster care students in online educational environments. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, have graduated from high school within the last three academic years (2020, 2021, or 2022), and have experienced online learning during high school (grades 9-12) for at least 9 months (consecutively or non-consecutively) while in foster care. Participants will be asked to complete a Google Form survey, participate in one online interview, participate in one online focus group, validate their recorded responses, and complete a short writing prompt consisting of five open ended questions online which should take about 2-2.5 hours overall to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please complete this Google Form. A consent document is included in the link above and will be emailed to you. Participants will receive a $25 gift card (Walmart, Target, or Amazon) via email when all study parts are complete.

Twitter

Are you a former foster care student who has experienced online education in the last 3 years? Direct message me for information about a research study on foster student online learning.

Appendix H

Participant Recruitment Email

Dear [Recipient Name]:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. degree in Education. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of former foster care students in online educational environments, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older, have graduated from high school within the last three academic years (2020, 2021, or 2022), and have experienced online learning during high school (grades 9-12) for at least 9 months (consecutively or non-consecutively) while in foster care. Participants, if willing, will be asked to complete a Google Form survey, participate in one online interview, participate in one online focus group, validate their recorded responses, and complete a short writing prompt consisting of five open ended questions. It should take approximately 10 minutes to complete the Google Form, 45-60 minutes to complete the interview, 45-60 minutes to complete the focus group, and 20-30 minutes to complete the writing prompt questions through Google Forms. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here to complete the online survey which includes your informed consent. You may contact me at contact me at (removed for publication) with any questions.

A consent document is included in the link above and will be emailed to you. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to type your name and the date on the consent document and proceed to the demographic survey.

Participants will receive a $25 gift card (Walmart, Target, or Amazon) via email when all study parts are complete.

Sincerely,

Tiffany Beckwith
Liberty University Ph.D. of Education Candidate

Appendix I

Screening Questions

1. What is your age? 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, other
2. Which year did you graduate from high school? 2020, 2021, 2022, other
3. Have you experienced online learning during high school (grades 9-12) for at least nine months (consecutively or non-consecutively) while in foster care? yes or no

Appendix J

Participant Demographic & Focused Life History Survey (as a continuation of the screening form.)

Participants had access to a PDF copy of the consent form (also sent through email) on the first page of the Google Form. They needed to designate consent before by typing their name and dating the form moving forward in the form.

1. Please provide your contact information:
    a. Email address ________________________________
    b. Phone number _______________________________
2. When did you first attend an online learning environment in high school? 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade.
    a. Was this related to the COVID-19 Pandemic? yes or no
    b. When did you stop attending this online learning environment? 9th, 10th, 11th, 12th grade, I graduated from this online learning environment/school.
    c. Why did you stop attending this online learning environment? __________
3. What is your gender? Female, Male, Other, Prefer not to answer.
4. How would you classify yourself? (Options included below – may select several):
    a. African American or Black
    b. Asian
    c. Caucasian
    d. Hispanic or Latino
    e. Indigenous Person
    f. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

   g. Other ________________

5. What age did you enter the foster care system? 0-18, I do not remember.
6. What age did you exit the foster care system? 14-18, other
7. How many placements (homes) did you experience while in the foster care system? 0-3, 4-6, 7-9. 10-12. 13 or more, I do not remember.
8. How many times did you change school when in foster care? 0-3, 4-6, 7-9. 10-12. 13 or more, I do not remember.
   a. Of those times you changed schools, how many occurred during the grades of 9-12? ___________
9. What is your marital status? Single, Married, Divorced, Separated, Prefer not to answer, Other
10. Are you a parent? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
11. Are you employed? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
12. Are you a student in a post-secondary program? Yes Full-time, Yes Part-time, No, Prefer not to answer, Other
13. Are you homeless or about to be homeless? Yes, No, Prefer not to answer, Other