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**They Always Stand Out, Even When They Don't Stand Out:  
A Qualitative Exploration of Educators' Perceptions of Foster Youth**

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**by**

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## **Dedication**

This report is dedicated to my mother, Addie Flannigan. She has been a model of commitment, tenacity, and perseverance throughout my graduate career. Her compassion for helping others has inspired me to do the same.

This report is also dedicated to my sisters, Antoinette Mkwapatira and Adrienne Humphreys. They always made time to hear me out on all the stressors that pervade the graduate process, and I am healthier and happier with their support and kind words.

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## **Abstract**

### **They Always Stand Out, Even When They Don't Stand Out: A Qualitative Exploration of Educators' Perceptions of Foster Youth**

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Youth in the child welfare system may have academic needs that go unmet as a result of the perceptions that educators hold of this population. This study explores teachers' ideas about foster youth, both as a population in general and the specific foster youth with whom they have interacted. Fifteen current and former teachers at the middle and high school levels were interviewed in a semi-structured format, and data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Results suggest low general and often negative knowledge of the child welfare system and foster youth who may be present in their schools as well as expectations of poor emotional and academic performance. Foster youth were equated, perhaps erroneously, to economically disadvantaged students as a whole. Foster youth held a stigmatized identity as irreparably damaged. Such negative perceptions were combatted with more accurate depictions of each individual student when educators took time to connect with students on a personal level. Based on these results, a school environment that includes well trained staff and informed peers who are able to provide safe spaces for foster youth to discuss their situations for better emotional processing and more open, less marginalized treatment of foster youth status may help foster youth better cope with the turmoil in their lives. Results also inform suggestions for a program to improve teacher competency around foster youth.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to data released by the US Department of Health and Human Services from their Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS, 2013, in Administration on Children, Youth and Families), nearly 400,000 children were in foster care across the nation in 2012. Thirty-six percent of these children were secondary school-age, between the ages of 12 and 18. According the 2013 Data Book released annually by the Texas Department of Family Protective Services (DFPS), 46,649 children were under the care and responsibility of DFPS in 2013. While some of these children were involved with the system but still residing with their families, 30,740 had been removed from their homes and currently lived in a foster care substitute placement. In fiscal year 2013 alone, 17,022 children entered foster care (DFPS, 2013). Additionally, although the ratio of ethnicities represented in the Texas child welfare system currently mirrors that of the state such that children of color are not disproportionately represented, this disparity has been an enduring trend nationwide. Although recent efforts to stem disproportionality have shown promise, further understanding of the factors that affect students of color within the child welfare system is still necessary.

Children within the child welfare system face many challenges with their status as foster youth. I argue that there is a stigma associated with being in foster care. The marginalization experienced by those students whose foster care status is known may be detrimental to their success in school due to the negative perceptions of foster youth. Foster youth need strong support systems both within the school environment and within their foster homes. They may struggle with constructive ways to handle their perceived stigma. A school environment that includes well trained staff and informed peers who are

able to provide safe spaces for foster youth to discuss their situations for better emotional processing and more open, less marginalized treatment of foster youth status may help foster youth better cope with the turmoil in their lives.

Currently, many adults are ill-informed on foster care in general. A recent nationwide poll conducted by Harris Poll and commissioned by the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association found that 83% of adults have little to no knowledge of what foster youth experience, and yet only 11% had any positive opinions about these youth (PR Newswire, 2014). As all adolescents are exploring their social worlds, their identities are strongly tied to the relationships they form with others (McMurry, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2010). A stable, safe environment for stigma management may help foster youth develop more normally because they can talk about their experiences safely without feeling ridiculed. This study details interviews with middle and high school teachers concerning their knowledge and opinions of foster youth to better understand how much personal information teachers have about the students in their classrooms as well how teachers may react to foster students.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Children in the foster care system currently experience many adverse educational outcomes. In Texas, the 2012 school year saw nearly a quarter of the foster youth population in special education as compared to only 9% of the state population (Burstain & Taylor, 2013). These children were most likely to be in special education for emotional disturbance issues rather than a learning disability. Additionally, foster youth were more often suspended from school for behavioral disruptions than the general child population. Foster youth are also more likely to drop out and less likely to graduate for myriad reasons (Burstain & Taylor, 2013) including instability and discrimination.

### **Instability**

As a result of needing placement in substitute care, foster youth experience volatility in both home and school life that leads to many disruptions before the student even encounters academic challenges. These challenges uniquely affect foster youth and may serve to undermine their academic success.

#### **PLACEMENT INSTABILITY**

A risk factor that youth in the foster care system face is the frequency and instability of their substitute care placements. Children may be placed in various types of non-parental care, such as with a foster family, in a group home, or in a residential treatment center, and children may transition through these placements during their stay in foster care. Children in the Texas foster care system had an average of 2.5 placements in 2013 (DFPS Databook). Research has examined placement disruptions in terms emotional well-being from a presence of mental disorder and pathology, but less so in

terms of soliciting reports from the students themselves (Hussey & Guo, 2005). As a more direct influence on academic performance, however, a frequent by-product of having to transition between substitute care placements is transitioning to different schools.

#### **SCHOOL INSTABILITY**

As students relocate to their new living situations, they must often change schools. These school disruptions have some obvious implications regarding continuation of educational pacing. Anecdotally, there is often a delay between the time of entry into a new placement and enrollment in a nearby school. Most schools require enrollment and identification paperwork before a child may attend classes, and a student's records must be manually—the transfer is done digitally but must be manually initiated—transferred between schools to facilitate class placement and address other academic needs (Advocates for Children of New York, 2000; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). If this delay in school enrollment is not during the summer months, it translates into missed instruction time. As students transfer schools, the inconsistency of course offerings and electives may leave many students behind in the credits needed for an on-time graduation (Zeitlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006).

Truancy also has been documented as a result of placement disruption. Zorc and colleagues (2013) found that elementary school children who had frequent placement disruptions attended an average of 3.6 schools in two years. More importantly, they found that the high degree of school instability held for children who were reunited with their parents, and that this level did not differ before and after placement, suggesting that factors that lead to a child's entry into the foster care system may also contribute to

school instability. Regardless of the reason for school instability, the main detriment of foster youth's school instability is truancy. In addition to the loss of instruction time in the classroom, students may be negatively perceived by teachers as uncommitted and disengaged from their schoolwork, which may in turn cause teachers to discriminate further against these students in the form of decreased attention, encouragement, and assistance. This effect has not yet been explored in the literature, so this study aims to determine the presence of negative perceptions of foster youth.

Truancy has been linked to many poor academic outcomes. As children miss instruction and fall behind, they may become less engaged in school. As mentioned earlier, foster children are already at risk for greater academic disengagement (Fantuzzo, Perlman, & Dobbins, 2011; Lipscomb, Schmitt, Pratt, Acock, & Pears, 2014; Pears, Kim, Fisher, and Yoerger, 2013; Slade & Wissow, 2005). Chang and Romero of the National Center for Children in Poverty chronicled the effects of truancy at early ages, noting that children who frequently miss school in kindergarten have the lowest academic performance among their peers by first grade, even when accounting for differences due to ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status (Chang & Romero, 2011). This increasing disengagement from school may lead adolescents to drop out entirely (Balfanz, Herzog, & Mac Iver, 2007). In a 2014 study by Kravitz which examined reasons that foster youth left school in the 2010-2011 school year, 28.7% of these students dropped out as opposed to graduating or transferring. Students who drop out are less likely to be employed, more likely to be have poor mental and physical health, and more likely to be incarcerated (Ikomi, 2010). Truancy experienced as a result of frequent substitute care placement disruption poses a unique risk for foster youth.

These instability factors in addition to myriad others situate foster youth with unique vulnerability when it comes to academic success. For adults within the academic environment to help foster youth manage these unique stressors, these adults must be informed about these barriers and how best to handle them. Understanding what adults know about foster youth and their unique situation serves as a valuable starting point in developing best practices for educators of foster youth.

### **School Climate and Perceptions**

Another hurdle to success for foster youth beyond the complications of attending school is the perception formed by others in the school environment. The image of foster youth that teachers, administrators, and other students hold is of importance. Whether individuals in the school are aware of foster students' presence may influence how those students are treated. Due to confidentiality concerns and lack of formal protocol, no clear procedural steps exist in both identifying students as foster youth and treatment of those students in classrooms. Teachers are not uniformly informed of a foster youth's status, and this information may be spread only anecdotally among faculty when a problem arises. A school environment that is more open to accepting students from different backgrounds, particularly students whose home lives may be less than ideal, may help foster youth develop in more healthy ways and offer the support they need to achieve their goals, an effect this study seeks to examine. No research was found on the effects of school environment on foster youth. This study seeks to understand the point of view of teachers. Although there is no extant research specific to foster youth in this matter, research has shown how other marginalized adolescents fare in various environments.

## **RACE AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

Racial disparities between White students and students of color continue to persist in education. These issues have not been sufficiently explored in foster youth, but their effects for the general population are well-documented and likely exist as compounded obstacles that foster youth face. Some of these disparities are due to issues of poverty and low resources. Studies have shown that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds underperform when compared to their more affluent peers (Reardon, 2011). While a lack of resources often contributes to the academic inequity students of color experience, systemic discrimination also plays a role. Bentley-Edwards, Thomas, and Stevenson (2013) detailed the discriminatory education practices that serve to inhibit Black student progress. African American students receive more frequent discipline than their White peers. This discipline also tends to be more severe, such as expulsion versus detention. These disciplinary practices occur despite the fact that Black students are objectively not less well-behaved than their peers (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Gregory, Skiba, Noguera, 2010).

These differences in treatment are a result of the perceptions that many educators have of Black students. African American boys, especially those who physically mature earlier than their peers, are often perceived as more adult-like, so their transgressions are considered more threatening and violent because they are understood as having maturely reasoned adult intent behind them (Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, & Davis, 2002). Black girls face a similar perception issues, as educators often perceive them as being more disruptive in class by talking loudly and conducting themselves in improper ways for their gender (Morris, 2007). As a result of these perceptions, Black students spend more time having their behavior monitored and corrected and less time receiving



instruction, leading them to fall behind their peers. As many foster youth are students of color, it is possible that teachers, particularly those who are unaware of their history of involvement with the child welfare system, disproportionately react to them as students whose culture of communication is at odds with proper classroom conduct as opposed to providing them with additional support in coping with the experience of foster care involvement.

## **STIGMA**

I argue that there is a stigma attached to being in foster care. Though some debate exists on the ways to categorize stigmas, two general categories tend to permeate the literature: concealable or non-concealable (Goffman, 1963). Non-concealable (or visible) stigmas, such as physical disabilities or ethnicity in certain circles, are dealt with differently than concealable stigmas. These invisible stigmas are those that are known or readily obvious only to the individual who possesses them, such as chronic illness, mental health disorders, sexual orientation, and other social statuses (Goffman, 1963). The interest of this research is in the concealable stigma that foster youth may possess and how educators react to the revelation of this stigmatized identity.

It is important to keep in mind that while this study discusses the stigma of foster youth as “their stigma” for the sake of clarity, stigma is always a socially constructed characteristic and not one that an individual definitively possesses. There is no inherent shame in being a youth in the child welfare system, as the victims of maltreatment or trauma are involved through no fault of their own. The stigmatized issues of the parents—drug addiction, marital discord, anger problems, poor resource management—that lead to the maltreatment or the lack of extended family support in the face of parental

death, and CPS involvement are often transferred to the youth. I make the argument that society comes to view foster youth as irreparably damaged goods.

The social environment within which a stigma is being managed can affect the strategic choices and consequences of these choices. The majority of studies that incorporate environment have dealt with managing stigmas within the workplace (McGonagle & Barnes-Farrell, 2013; Stone & Hernandez, 2013), but general social settings are also explored. Saewyc and colleagues (2008), as mentioned, demonstrated the negative consequences that a stigmatizing environment can have on adolescents. Another key aspect of stigma management in adolescents is the additional roles of adults in adolescents' lives who are also compelled to make management choices. Aviram (2006) interviewed adolescents with alcohol dependence. The participants noted that the fear of revealing their abuse issues and being stigmatized prevented them from seeking help from their families or medical professionals. Even as the adolescents visited their doctors with emotional and behavioral problems, the doctors themselves created a silence around the topic of alcoholism and avoided discussing alcohol usage because of their own desire to attribute to issues to a less stigmatized problem. Fielden and colleagues (2011) focused on how "silences" on the part of adults in youth's lives keep HIV-positive adolescents disconnected from their social worlds. While these silences are meant to keep the youth protected in certain spaces, they ultimately lead to a sense of oppression, futility, and lowered well-being for adolescents as they age and seek out welcoming social circles. Foster youth may be hindered similarly when educators seek to keep their status from others if such withholding ultimately leads to less informed care for these students.

Adults can also be helpful in fielding concerns from adolescents about their management strategies. In a study of resilience in teenagers from marginalized communities—high poverty, parents with histories of mental illness or drug addiction, instances of abuse or neglect, low school attendance, residential instability—Ungar (2004) found that participants reported the benefits of adults who gave them space to practice and solidify their possible identities and helped them choose constructive ways to manage their stigmas. These teens were found to be more resilient to the deleterious effects that their marginalized stigmas might have brought them. Clearly, the environment and particularly the adults within an environment can have vastly differing effects on the well-being of stigmatized adolescents. As such, foster youth may flourish best in school environments where educators are attuned to their needs and give them a safe space to process their reality and identity.

### **The Current Study**

Foster youth face a variety of barriers to academic success. In addition to school and home instability and the effects of maltreatment, foster youth may be poorly perceived in the eyes of educators, resulting in a stigmatized identity. In order to better understand how educators may influence the academic environment of foster youth, current and former faculty and administrators in middle and high schools were recruited for a qualitative exploration of this issue. Participants gave details of their roles within their schools as well as school characteristics. They then were interviewed about their knowledge of and experience with youth in the child welfare system within the context of their roles as educators. Interviews were transcribed and coded for key concepts that

emerged across interviews. These concepts were then gathered within overarching themes that summarize the experiences of educators and their perceptions of foster youth.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Current and former educators were recruited via outreach to departments throughout the university's college of education as well as via targeted solicitations to community members. To be included in the study, participants had to be a current or former teacher or administrator (principal, assistant principal, special education department chair, etc.) with at least one prior year of experience at the middle or high school level. Corps members of Teach for America—a program that recruits recent college graduates to teach for two years in order to encourage people from a wider variety of disciplines to consider careers in teaching—in their second year of teaching commitment were also eligible. In order to gather a variety of experiences, specific interactions with foster youth were not required.

Participants indeed ranged in their roles and environments. Table 1 details participant demographics. The majority of the 15 interviewees were teachers, with one special education department chair and another participant holding both of those roles at different points. Age ranged from 26-71 with a mean of 32.60 (2.48) years and an outlier of 71 years. The majority of participants identified as White with two indicating they were Hispanic and two selecting Black. A variety of subject areas were represented, including English, math, foreign language, and social studies, with math being the most common subject taught. Participants had an average of 5.56 (2.027) years of experience. Most teachers had 2-3 years of experience, but the most experienced participant taught for 33 years. Participants were evenly split between middle and high schools, and all but two participants taught in a general public school (one participant taught in a charter

school and the other in a magnet program). Two-thirds of schools were located in urban areas, while a third were either suburban or rural. The student body of these schools mostly consisted of predominantly Black or Hispanic students as opposed to White students or a diverse population, and parental incomes were predominantly low or diverse.

Participant Characteristics						Self-Reported School Characteristics				
Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Ethnicity	Subject Taught	Years of Experience	Level	Type	Location	Student Body Ethnicity <sup>c</sup>	Parental Income
Aaron	28	M	White	Math	1	High	Public	Suburban	Minority	Diverse
Carmen <sup>a</sup>	28	F	White	Multiple	2	Middle	Public	Urban	Minority	Low
Caroline	29	F	White	English/Math	6	Middle	Public	Urban	Diverse	Low
Craig <sup>a</sup>	26	M	White	Math	2	Both	Magnet	Urban	Minority	Low
Donald	29	M	White	Geography	3	Middle	Public	Suburban	Diverse	Low
Frank	31	M	Black	Math	4	High	Public	Urban	Minority	Low
Inez	26	F	Hispanic	Math	3	Middle	Public	Urban	White	Diverse
Jacob	71	M	Black	Social Studies	33	High	Public	Urban	Diverse	Diverse
Margot	32	F	White	Science	8	High	Public	Rural	White	Diverse
Meghan <sup>a</sup>	30	F	White	Math b	2.5	High	Public	Urban	Minority	Low
Michael	31	M	White	Spanish	2	Middle	Public	Suburban	Minority	Low
Peter	33	M	White	Social Studies	6	High	Public	Suburban	Diverse	Diverse
Robyn	35	F	White	Math	4	Middle	Public	Urban	Diverse	Low
Rose	28	F	White	SpEd DC <sup>b</sup>	2	High	Public	Urban	Minority	Low
Stacey <sup>a</sup>	32	F	Hispanic	English	5	Middle	Charter	Urban	Minority	Low

Note: <sup>a</sup> Teach for America corps member; <sup>b</sup> Special Education Department Chair; <sup>c</sup> Minority indicates a predominantly Black or Hispanic population; White indicates predominantly White population; Diverse indicates a mixture of ethnicities.

Table 1: Participant and School Demographics

## **Measures**

### **DEMOGRAPHICS**

Participants were asked to provide details on their teaching tenure. They indicated their position in their school (teacher, administrator), subject taught if applicable, and length of tenure. Particulars of the schools in which participants taught were also solicited, including general geographic region, school type (charter, general public, magnet, parochial, etc.), ethnic/racial composition of student body, and parental socioeconomic status composition.

### **INTERVIEWS**

Semi-structured interviews were held with each individual participant either in person or via internet video chat. Written consent was obtained from each participant that included permission to audio record the interview. In addition to providing information about their teaching tenure and school environment as previously detailed, participants were asked to reflect on their time teaching and consider: a) what knowledge they had about which of their students were foster youth, including how they acquired and used that knowledge, b) their opinions on the academic performance and socioemotional competence of foster students in general, c) knowledge of programs available to assist foster youth in college entry and matriculation, d) how other individuals in the school environment regarded foster youth, and e) the potential stigma associated with being involved in the child welfare system. The interview ended with a direct inquiry into the existence of a stigma against foster youth and the form this stigma may take because the researcher sought to explore this issue as the participants understood it.

## **Analysis**

The interview audio recordings were transcribed by a reputable professional service and reviewed by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Based on the strategies recommend by Corbin and Strauss (2008), after each interview the researcher wrote a half- to one-page memo that featured salient details of the interview, such as elements of the school environment that particularly stood out or comments on stigma. Coding then began using Atlas.ti 7, a software package designed for qualitative data analysis.

### **CODING FOR THEMES**

Per the grounded theory approach of Corbin & Strauss (2008), analysis took the form of various methods of coding. The transcripts were read for key concepts, repeated themes, and salient features that were gathered and combined to coalesce into a theory. Coding was done in two steps: open coding and axial coding. The first step to analyzing qualitative data is to review the transcripts for concepts, termed open coding. Using the first few transcripts, the researcher collected ideas that were particularly salient or that were repeated within the same transcript or across transcripts. As a list of concepts was generated, properties and dimensions were also identified. Properties are smaller divisions of concepts, while dimensions are the particular characteristics of a property that differentiate it from the other properties within the main concept. After generating concepts from the data, axial coding began wherein connections were drawn among the concepts in an attempt to uncover an overarching theory.

### **ESTABLISHING TRUSTWORTHINESS**

Providing assurance to the reader that the data have been gathered and analyzed in a way that remains faithful to and draws appropriate inferences from the source material



is of utmost importance in any research. In typical quantitative methods, these assurances are made through controlling the internal validity, external validity, objectivity, and reliability of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) maintained that these same assurances can be offered through asserting the credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability of qualitative data.

Credibility offers a method of internal validity for a qualitative study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described credibility as representing the reality of the participants' lived experiences. Credibility is maintained in the present study through peer debriefing and member checks. The researcher reviewed select transcripts, codes, themes, and compiled results with the second author throughout the analysis process to ensure the results were supported in the transcripts. Additionally, the final results were presented to several of the participants to verify that the inferences made from the data fit with their experiences and represented an accurate portrayal of their voice.

As a measure of external validity, transferability refers to the generalizable nature of the study results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One method of ensuring transferability, as noted by Corbin and Strauss (2008), is to gather a diverse sample. The participants in this study ranged in their subject area specialty, years of experience, path to employment, and school environment. By gathering participants with diverse backgrounds, the results will be more applicable to the population of educators as a whole. This strategy for transferability will ensure good external validity of the study.

Conducting reliably replicable research is the main concern addressed by dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the same vein, ensuring that results are derived from the data and can be confirmed with the data is an essential step as well. Both of

these goals were simultaneously accomplished by keeping an audit trail of detailed research notes and documentation throughout the research process, which was essential to assuring that another researcher could reproduce a study of confirmable results (Guba, 1981). The research notes included the memos for each interview that detailed the primary researcher's thoughts and reflections as she gathered concepts and their properties. This audit trail of data collection and data analysis procedure was reviewed by the second author to 1) ensure appropriate record keeping was being done, 2) offer opinions on the theory formation from the data in order to identify all possible alternative theories, and 3) confirm that results were appropriately derived from the data. With these strategies, replicable and confirmable research results were assured.

## **RESULTS**

The majority of participants had some experience with foster youth in their schools and communities. In the process of reviewing the transcripts for relevant information, 141 unique codes were generated. These codes fell into five overarching themes: knowledge, disclosure, perceptions, student population, and stigma. These five themes capture the thoughts and actions of educators as informed by their perceptions of both foster youth and the general school environments in which they worked. Within each theme, several codes captured the essential elements of that theme. These codes recurred over the course of interviews and formed the body of each theme's meaning. Additionally, one participant's experiences are worth individual examination as a case of the child welfare system and community synchronizing their efforts to support youth in need.

### **Knowledge**

Participants discussed knowledge in terms of who in their schools knew which students were foster youth, their personal knowledge on the child welfare system, and the source of that knowledge. The majority of participants agreed that administrators and individuals in counseling roles knew the foster youth in schools:

Peter: "The Special Education Director, the LSSP, the school psychologist, right? They were aware."

Craig: "I mean, I would assume there are administrators who have access to that information."

Stacey: "I'm guessing that like the office administration staff would have known just [be]cause they kept up with a lot of stuff."

Caroline, a 29-year-old English and math teacher with 6 years of experience, thought the information in one student's case was more widely known "by her friends and by all of the teachers and all of the administrators for sure." This was, however, not the common response.

#### **ANECDOTAL KNOWLEDGE THROUGH MEDIA EXPOSURE**

Some participants did have knowledge of particular aspects of the child welfare system, such as substitute care placements in which youth are removed from their biological homes and placed with relatives, an unrelated family, or group homes, or the reality that unstable placements may mean changing schools. When probed further, a few participants noted the media as the source of their knowledge. Aaron, a 28-year-old math teacher for one year, spoke to the negative media portrayal of the child welfare system: "I know like in popular culture movies or TV or whatever. Sometimes, there are [stories], and I guess in the news. There are stories about bad foster environments for kids." Robyn, a 35-year-old math teacher in her fourth year, focused on the media message of increasing need for support of foster youth:

"You have whatever you read in the news or the media about. There's this huge need for foster families, especially for older children and what happens to them when they age out of the system and things like that."

What anecdotal knowledge the teachers themselves had was gained via media exposure and was often negative. Participants generally thought that only administrators and counseling support staff were privy to the status of foster youth unless behavioral issues arise.

## **AWARENESS TIED TO BEHAVIOR**

While the majority of participants had a general idea of who would know, they believed that teachers may not know about these students because awareness of foster youth in the classroom was mostly tied to behavior. When asked if foster youth would stand out in any way in a classroom, Jacob, a 71-year-old retired social studies teacher of 33 years, remarked, “I don't think so...unless there was some kind of problem that the teacher was having with the student.” Frank, a 31-year-old math teacher of 4 years, echoed this sentiment: “the only way you would stand out as being known as a foster kid [...] would be if you got in trouble.” Caroline noted that even the administration really only focused on the behavioral aspects of foster youth:

“I think that the assistant principal who was in charge of the middle school viewed kids pretty much as behavior issues, and like, if they're, if like being a foster youth was a related or potentially related to their behavior issues then it was something that she thought about, and if it wasn't then she didn't.”

## **Disclosure**

Participants discussed the disclosure of information about the foster students in their classrooms and their reactions to this information. Participants were asked about any noticeable qualities that stood out about students before they found out that the students were involved in the child welfare system, how they ultimately found out, and if their interactions with the students changed after they found out.

## **PRE-DISCLOSURE**

Noticeable behavioral issues. In line with the earlier finding of behavioral issues being tied to awareness of foster youth in the classroom, half of participants commented

of the emotional or behavioral peculiarity of certain students they later learned were foster youth. Michael, a 31-year-old Spanish teacher of two years, noticed that one student “always had an attitude and didn't seem to like authority very much, umm, and had some different things [that] just kind of rubbed him the wrong way.” Craig, a 26-year-old former Teach for America corps member who taught math, noted both emotional and behavioral changes in one of his students who he later learned was recently removed from his home:

“He was very moody. And the beginning of school, he was, like, very excited. But [later in the year] he also emotionally, like, wasn't there. He was trying, but then he took, like, a very negative turn with his behavior. Like, he would just often, like, I would be teaching and I'd find him, like, on his back, under my desk, looking up at me.”

Also of note were teachers' responses when they did not notice any behavioral issues. In 28-year-old Carmen's recollections of one student during her two-year Teach for America tenure, she described “a student that [...] could go under the radar. Like [she] had some stuff going on, but could go under the radar with like, because she was really polite and like, you know, doing her work, and things like that.” Statements like these ultimately reflect an expectation of behavioral issues because they suggest foster youth are noteworthy when they do not exhibit behavior problems. These students stand out even when they do not stand out.

#### **TEACHER GRAPEVINE DISCLOSURE**

Overall, a lack of formal policy surrounding the disclosure of this information created disparate experiences as far as receiving the information from administrative personnel. When teachers did find out from their administration or colleagues, it was usually due to

the academic or behavioral problems of the students. Caroline discussed finding out about two students from her fellow teachers as part of her introduction her first year:

“Somebody was like, ‘Oh, I have to tell you about Peter. This is what his deal is. Oh, I have to tell you about Alicia. This is what her deal is.’ And they kind of like filled me in from the get go[...] And before that I was just kind of told in the context of like, well this kid is always getting into trouble, and he doesn't do very well in his classes.”

Foster youth self-disclosure. No formal disclosure policy at the administrative level existed in any of the participants’ schools. This selective disclosure from administration is likely due to confidentiality policies surrounding the privacy of foster youth’s case details, as 26-year-old math teacher Inez noted: “Counselors and the administration would know, but it’s not something that they’re necessarily gonna share with teachers unless the foster parents or the kids want to share that information.” Indeed, the foster youth themselves were the most common source of disclosure:

Margot: “Ahh, a lot of them would tell me.”

Inez: “Every, every little one that I’ve had has been the one that’s told me that they’re adopted.”

Aaron: “One person told me that they were.”

Robyn: “And it's like, ‘Ah, what's going on?’ And she's like, ‘Well, I moved back in with my mom. I had stayed with a foster family and now I'm back with my mom and,’ kind of telling me the history of that. So she volunteered it; I never would have asked or even known to ask.”

## TEACHERS CREATE PERSONAL CONNECTIONS

Clearly there are circumstances in which foster youth feel comfortable disclosing their status. Teachers who reported the disclosure of status directly from the youth themselves always mentioned creating a personal connection with their students. In one of the best examples of this connection, Inez, along with a colleague, created a weekly meal meeting for students they identified as struggling with personal issues, including being in foster care, which they termed “Lunch Bunch.” Inez described Lunch Bunch fondly:

“Lunch Bunch [is] where another teacher friend and I identified some of our kiddos that had some kind of issues and could either go one way or the other. I mean down the fork in the road. So we invited them on Fridays so we could like make tacos, and, you know, just watch movies or not even have something going on, just talk about, just get them involved because if they do have – if they don’t feel grounded at home at least they can have, you know, some sense of security and stability at school.”

She notes the effect that establishing a personal connection can have on foster students: “And if you open up the conversation and just make them feel comfortable, maybe that’s something that they would want to share with you.” Caroline also created a meaningful connection with one of her foster students by establishing a code word they could use to communicate privately. This code system helped Caroline’s relationship with her student flourish:

“So if he ever came in and was like, ‘You know, Ms. Caroline, I couldn’t have breakfast today cause I was out of Lucky Charms,’ like nudge, nudge, I knew that meant he hadn’t taken his [mood stabilizing] medicine, and at that point, like just making that



little pact with him kind of opened flood gates of like Peter kind of letting me in to his life.”

These examples show the positive, supportive impact of a warm teacher/student relationship, especially for foster youth.

#### **POST-DISCLOSURE REACTIONS**

After teachers found out about their foster student’s lives, they reported a variety of reactions to that information. The majority initially said that no change in interactions occurred, but then they immediately offered some examples of changes. The most common interaction change was more attention paid to the student, often in the form of increased sensitivity to their behavioral differences and needs. Thirty-two-year-old science teacher Margot focused on including her student in all activities around the school during her 8 years of teaching: “I think I [...] maybe took more of a protective [role] once I had a greater idea of what was going on. It's like, ‘All right, you know, no, you come and you join us. You're not going to be alone.’” Robyn “made sure [that she] kind of kept a special eye on [her student].” Michael took on a parental role for the student in which he “was more careful about keeping track of his work, you know, kind of, kind of like doing some of the things that a parent might need to do for the child.”

In some cases, the foster student’s perceptions of the teacher also changed as their relationship improved. For Caroline, her student grew less paranoid about her intentions when they interacted. Craig’s student had fewer behavioral problems in the classroom and was able to focus on his schoolwork, knowing that he could chat with Craig when he needed to. After Margot’s student graduated, she received a warm letter of thanks from him for helping him score well on his Advanced Placement exams to earn college credit.

These examples show how foster students may benefit from the closer bonds that can be formed when teachers reach out to them.

### **BENEFITS OF DISCLOSURE**

When asked if information about foster youth would be beneficial for teachers, participants unanimously agreed that having that information would allow them to better support these students. As a special education department chair with access to the information in her foster students' case files, Rose thought that information should be shared: "Yeah, I mean I do feel like it would help the regular ed[ucation] teachers." Jacob summed up the value of this information:

"I think it would be a benefit and the more you know about your students in your classroom, the better off you will be, and you may be able to better understand some, you know, some of the behavior, uh, of foster kids."

Participants offered a variety of responses to the information they gained from various sources about the foster youth in their classrooms. Foster youth most often disclosed their status themselves, particularly to teachers who built personal connections with them. The majority of teacher responses favored greater support of the students. While teachers reached out where they could, they believed that greater dissemination of information on their students would benefit both the teacher and the student by allowing the teacher to build a better connection with the student. Ultimately, information, or lack thereof, likely informs the perceptions that teachers have of foster youth.

## **Perceptions**

Participants shared a range of opinions related to foster youth in terms of academic, behavioral, and emotional competencies. Ideas generated during the interviews were too numerous to list exhaustively here, so chosen responses reflect those that were mentioned by at least a third of participants. It should be first noted that all participants acknowledged the individual nature of student behavior and the inability to really categorize or generalize all students. Participants did, however, have opinions on how foster youth as a population may be conceptualized by many in the school environment.

### **EXPECTATION OF BEHAVIORAL DIFFERENCES**

These teachers believed that foster youth in general are likely to behave differently from their peers who remain with their biological parents. Caroline notes that she has “never had a foster student who didn't behave differently who wasn't, you know, in one way or another like troubled,” and Robyn agreed that “there might be a propensity towards misbehavior.” Donald, a 29-year-old geography teacher of three years, thought similarly:

“Fortunately or unfortunately, probably unfortunately, I'd probably presume students in the foster care system to probably be more prone to misbehavior issues in class [...] probably most of my colleagues probably share the same prejudice that I do or did as far as just assuming that foster students are probably going to be more prone to misbehavior and things like that.”

### **EXPECTATION OF POOR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE**

In addition to misbehavior, foster youth also are perceived as students who typically have poor academic performance. Carmen thought the difficulty of being

involved in the children welfare system created academic delays: “The disruption of being within the system, so I imagine that they don't perform as well, just you know on a grand scheme of things.” Peter, a 33-year-old social studies teacher of 6 years, discussed a student of his who was doing well academically, which surprised him: “I don't know if that's typical in foster students.” Teachers do recognize that some of this delay is likely due to the academic pacing issues that foster youth face, which are further compounded by delays in records transfers between schools. Michael summed up this issue:

“If they are foster youth, they likely have moved around a lot. So [...] there might not be scores for them, or they might not be very accurate because they have been moving around [...] And [...] especially within the core courses that they might have missed because they might move from one school district where they're teaching this one part of the curriculum or state standards to another school district where they are already farther ahead. And so there is this gap of learning that they just missed, you know.”

#### **IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY SUPPORT**

Craig reflects on the impact of positive family support on the motivation and performance of students in general:

“It's hard for a seventh grader to be intrinsically motivated to do well in math, it just, it is. Same with the ninth graders I taught. But when they have parents that really care about their success, whether it's one or two or an aunt or an uncle, like, that makes a much bigger difference.”

On the other hand, a lack of family support can deter academic goals. Robyn worried about this very issue: “I would be concerned for foster students, of not having a strong family background, necessarily, or a family that's willing to support them.”

## **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN FOSTER YOUTH AND ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED YOUTH**

The most common perception of foster youth, expressed by half of the participants, was that the issues that affect foster youth performance and well-being in academic settings were similar or identical to those barriers that youth in low income, low resource communities face. Craig was confident in the similarities in the population after being questioned on making such assertions throughout his interview:

“I would guarantee you the behaviors [of foster youth] were very similar to the [non foster youth] students that I was teaching who, like, had behavioral issues. [...] So the point I'm making is like, I was drawing comparisons, you were saying, between the low-income populations and the foster students, and I would say it's because there was a lot of overlap where I taught.”

These comparisons, as Craig mentioned, were likely due to the school environment in which he and many of the other participants taught, namely low income, low resource schools. Students in these schools often are plagued by high mobility between schools, household instability, and alternative living arrangement. In this way, teachers believed foster youth were not unique in their barriers to academic success.

### **Student Population**

Two-thirds of participants taught in middle and high schools that served predominantly low income families. Much of the discussion around foster youth in these schools focused on drawing comparisons to the other students that captured the similarities between the populations, such as home and school instability.

## **LIVING WITH OTHER RELATIVES**

In many of these communities, a large portion of students were living with other relatives due to parental problems, potentially without any involvement of the child welfare system. Rose, a 28-year-old special education department chair, observed that in her school, “There's a lot more kids living with an aunt or a grandma who aren't formally in foster care.” Stacey, a 32-year-old English teacher of 6 years, believed that the majority of the community was exposed to the child welfare system in some way: “Like in their neighborhoods, I mean, I'm sure they're familiar with kids being taken from homes and being placed other places.” Craig equated foster care placements with the home mobility of his other students as well:

“I definitely couldn't have differentiated the kids in my class who were foster students from the kids who were, you know, living in like, uncertain home circumstances. But I think those two [groups] had similarities compared to the kids that had more stable home lives.”

Indeed, Carmen saw her foster youth as perhaps faring better than some students who remained with their biological parents and thus in unstable conditions:

“I had a lot of students that were dealing with a lot of stressful things, and actually her [the foster student], she seemed like she had a relatively stable home life compared to a lot of other students in the classroom. Um, so she was kind of not in my eyes seen as more disadvantaged than other kids.”

## **HOME MOBILITY AND SCHOOL INSTABILITY**

Many students in these schools were also experiencing the high mobility and subsequent school instability that often plague foster youth, according to Meghan, a 30-

year-old English teacher and special education department chair: “Students are dropping out of other schools and moving. Students are not going to school and then decide to show up in October.” Craig made similar claims of the students in his school when asked why he thought his foster students would not have more problems than the general student body: “Families were moving [...It] just happens a lot in low income areas, [because] they couldn't afford rent, or they couldn't afford their house, or wherever they lived, their apartment, and they had to move somewhere else. And when they moved, they got redistricted.”

Although many participants drew similarities to students in low resource communities, there remained a distinct negative perception of foster youth that created a stigmatized identity around their involvement with the child welfare system.

## **Stigma**

The presence of a stigma surrounding foster youth was a debated issue among participants. The source of the stigma, when one was acknowledged, was also contended.

### **AGAINST CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM OR BIOLOGICAL PARENTS**

While some teachers believed no stigma existed against the youth themselves, they contended that the negative perception was towards other aspects such as the child welfare system or the biological parents. Stacey gave a brief response to this effect: “short answer: I would say no. And if anything, it's not directed at the kids. I think it'd be more directed at the [biological] parents.” Margot shared the same sentiment: “if there is a stigma it's more of, well, what kind of crap parents did they have. Not really on the kids.” Inez presented the idea of equating parental behavior with student behavior “Yeah,

what their parents are coming from and then attaching maybe their parents' negative behavior on this kiddo." The child welfare system was also blamed as the source of stigma for foster youth.

Stacey: "I think if anything maybe the system because it's very it seems like really intense and hard to manage so I think there's a stigma there, like a lot of good people are trying to work to fix it, um, so I don't think it'd be on the kid."

Donald: "All I do know of it, whether it's the local news, or the New York Times, or whatever is I don't read or hear positive stories about foster care systems."

Rose, the special education department chair, offered a unique take on the stigma around this population. Her perspective was one of a breakdown in the community support model being the source of shame. Rose argued that since informal kinship care—when youth are moved into the homes of their relatives—was common and often done without the involvement of the child welfare system, this already was an effective community intervention model. Youth in foster homes are failed by this system due to a string of incompetent relatives. Her idea is made clearer here:

"So I think there's very little stigma attached to either informal or formal kinship care at high school. But um, I think by extension that means that kids who are in you know foster care with a non-relative or a shelter, I feel like that is kind of seen as a bigger deal [...] because the community support model is so strong. It's like your mom's messed up and your aunt and your grandma and your uncle."

#### **FOSTER YOUTH ARE DAMAGED**

While some participants identify other aspects of a foster youth's circumstances that may reflect negatively on the youth, other participants tied the stigma into the idea of



an irreparable damage caused to foster youth that prevents them from excelling in life. Caroline offers a poignant summary of this viewpoint:

“I feel like the stigma is like these kids have been scarred in such a deep way that they're going to be super messed up for a long time, and that some of them are salvageable, and some of them are not, but that the scars are like deeper than we can imagine.”

Carmen echoed this image of foster youth as pitiable damaged goods:

“Maybe the stigma [is] partially being seen as broken or wounded, or other people assume, and other people [are] looking at them like, ‘Oh, I feel sorry for you,’ or ‘Oh, your life must be so hard’. Or like ‘Oh, now I think it's a foster kid, he must have been traumatized.’”

#### **IMPACT OF FELT STIGMA**

For participants who identified foster youth as stigmatized in some way, there was also a sense that these students very much felt the stigma against them. Several participants discussed the shame that foster youth felt around their living situations. Caroline discusses one of her students:

“Alicia wouldn't say a peep [about her home life] because she was like ashamed I think of, of her situation, and she like was holding out to go live with mom and dad, so that she just like kind of wanted to stay under the radar in terms of who she was living with.”

Meghan noted the potential academic deficits that could result from this felt stigma: “If the student does feel stigmatized by [...] her foster status then, I could see that

they would uh, here, she might be less likely to seek challenge. Because um, you know, being so identity threatened may be difficult.”

Silence. Many participants were concerned about the effect of a stigmatized identity on foster youth. They saw silence around the issue as one way that educators protect these students from harm. Caroline believed this concept to be the idea behind legal confidentiality for students:

“I mean it was like a FERPA [Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act] thing, which make sense. You shouldn't be like spilling people's personal lives all over the place, but um, I don't know. I think it was like maybe overly emphasized that like we can't tell anyone.”

Frank echoed this idea by actively seeking to protect his own students' identities: “So if there's a potential that you would stigmatize foster care youth, then I don't want you to know that that's what they are, because I don't want you to stigmatize them.” These quotes capture the presence of a stigmatized identity for foster youth, whether it is due to the system, the transgressions of parents, or the irrevocable harm done to the youth themselves. Teachers noted the shame caused by this stigma and their desire to protect students' well-being where possible.

### **Impromptu Case Study of Margot: Making the System Work**

One participant's experiences in her school and community stand out from the other interviewees. Margot is a 32-year-old White teacher with 8 years of experience at the high school level. Her school was located in a rural White community that was also a college town and as such, the school served a socioeconomically diverse body. Margot was the sole participant to speak highly positively about foster youth and the child

welfare system. This reaction likely stemmed from her community's wholly positive interactions with foster youth and the presence of many foster parents throughout the school and community.

Margot's community was devastated by pervasive methamphetamine use, so children and youth were often removed from their homes as a result of their parents' substance abuse issues and subsequent maltreatment. Thus, the community at large was consistently exposed to child protective services, and nearly everyone knew a child who was in foster care. Rather than avoiding the topic, though, many adults become very involved in the lives of these youth by serving as foster parents. As a result, the climate of the community and school was open and positive, and foster youth were not marginalized. Margot thought any stigma would be directed at the biological parents.

Margot's experiences were excellent examples of how an ideal community that uplifts foster youth would perform. The school had many great programs in place to support these students, and community members were actively supporting these students as well. This report demonstrates that exposure, involvement, and experience with foster youth, even kids who struggle academically and emotionally, can be a positive driving force in getting adults in these youth's lives to come to their aid.

## **Summary of Results**

Through the interview process, five overarching themes were uncovered: knowledge, disclosure, perceptions, student population, and stigma. Knowledge dealt with the manner in which information surrounding foster youth was handled and participants' personal knowledge of the child welfare system. Disclosure detailed the process of participants coming to know which of their students were foster youth and the

reactions to this information. Perceptions revealed participants' views of foster youth in general and the youth in particular with whom they had interactions in school. The student population of the participant's school influenced their ideas about all students as a whole within their schools and where foster youth may fit into that population. Stigma summarized the negative identity aspects that foster youth carry in the eyes of others as a result of their involvement in the child welfare system. These themes reveal much about teacher perceptions of foster youth in academic settings.

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants reflected on their experiences, including the general knowledge in their schools about foster youth, their opinions and the opinions of others on foster youth's academic performance, and the existence of a stigma. The five themes came together to form three groups of the related topics and are discussed here as they relate to extant research and each other as well how they offer new insights. The first two groups—knowledge/disclosure and perceptions/student population—inform the stigma that surrounds foster youth.

### **Knowledge and Disclosure**

Participants identified administrators as being most likely to know which students in their school were foster youth. When describing the child welfare system in general, participants often offered information that was gained from negative television and news accounts. Another aspect that arose was the concept that knowledge of foster youth in schools is closely tied with behavioral management of students. The most common source of disclosure was the foster youth themselves. These students would offer the information to their teachers, particularly those teachers who took time to create a personal connection with students, which often resulted in greater attention in order to provide additional emotional and academic support and more positive interactions with students. All participants believed the disclosure of foster youth status could benefit educators by supplying them with more information about the student and the needs that student may have.

The use of grapevine style communication to inform other teachers of foster youth, the fact that this communication tends to have a salacious bent, and the lack

of a formal policy around information disclosure all contribute to low concrete knowledge of foster youth and their circumstances. Given this finding, CASA's 2011 poll results showing that the majority of adults have little knowledge and even fewer positive opinions of foster youth is not surprising. Since educators have little factual knowledge, they likely do not know what to do with information once they have it or how it can be used to effectively support their students.

The finding that creating personal connections with students makes them more likely to self-disclose their status is encouraging. As Ungar (2004) found, giving students a safe space to speak and be themselves can be the best way to support them. When students feel they can directly communicate their needs, that voice is a great source of information on support directions. A school environment in which teachers reach out to their students and create safe spaces by making personal connections is ideal for reducing the stigma surrounding foster youth, if only through increased knowledge.

### **Perceptions and Student Population**

Participants have expectations that foster youth behave differently—usually worse—than students who remain with their biological parents. There is also an expectation of poor academic performance. The importance of family support was highlighted in views that having a good, stable support system at home, be it in the form of biological parents, relatives, or foster parents, motivated students to do well in school. In contrast, a poor home environment could deter academic success. In these ways, participants drew many parallels between foster youth and youth from economically advantaged backgrounds with high school mobility and chaotic home lives.

The expectation that foster youth will have behavioral problems may lead educators to disproportionately target these students for corrective action. Much like students of color who face disparate disciplinary attention (Gilliam & Shahar, 2006; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Morris, 2007), foster youth also face increased scrutiny and more severe punishment (Scherr, 2007). When students are punished more often, they may then act out more often in response (Hyman & Perone, 1998). In this way, the stigma surrounding foster youth is enhanced in the manner of self-fulfilling prophecy as these students respond to the disparate treatment they receive.

The conflation of foster youth with economically disadvantaged youth by teachers reflects a lack of nuance in interpreting the situations of the youth in their care. The chaos that occurs in students' lives is indistinguishable in terms of source and impact. This is an important factor because the entirety of foster youth's experiences must be considered in order to understand their outcomes. Harden (2004) noted that the foster care experience must be uniquely considered in addition to the maltreatment that these youth have faced. For example, although the surface details of student mobility may seem comparable, the circumstances differ in ways that may disparately impact students' well-being. When students living with biological parents move as a result of inability to pay rent or a mortgage, the entire family unit moves as a whole. The home relationships remain intact even while the school and neighborhood situations are changing. In contrast, a foster youth is removed from the home though problematic environment of their biological home and placed in often entirely unknown situations: a new family and a new school in a new city or part of town. The dissolution of relationships and the

necessity of rebuilding connections likely differ vastly among these two groups of students, though further research is needed to validate this claim.

## **Stigma**

While the existence of a stigma against foster youth was debated by some participants, the overall impression was that some form of negative identity followed these students, whether it was directed at the biological parents, the child welfare system, or the youth themselves. However the stigma may look to others, participants noted the impact such an identity had on foster youth. There was shame around being in foster youth and potential academic deficits due to low self-efficacy. Participants wanted to protect their students from this negative impact and often felt silence was an effective way to do so. They sought to keep the information out of the hands of those who might use it in ways that could harm the student.

While participants believed the stigma may not be against foster youth themselves, the informal information network is focused on disclosure due to behavioral issues, which suggests that the information is only useful as the cause of behavioral problems a student might be having. When foster status is distinctly tied to misbehavior, this perpetuates the stigmatized identity of youth.

The silence around foster youth status parallels that seen by Aviram in his 2006 study of adolescents with alcohol dependence. Educators may be hesitant to discuss sensitive information about their foster youth for fear of that information's misuse. This reluctance is despite the fact that participants noted the benefits of having more information about a student in order to offer him or her better support. Indeed, creating intentional silences around foster youth may do more harm than good if it isolates those



students (Fielden et al., 2011) and furthers the stigma that foster care is a taboo topic. If the true concern is misuse of information, then the focus of educators should be less on who holds information on students and more on how that information can be used to better the lives of students.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Although participants were able to provide rich detail in their variety of classroom experiences with foster youth, some limitations do exist. A larger sample size likely would provide an even greater variety of perspectives from educators. Additionally, the majority of participants were former educators. Experiences of current teachers may differ from those who have left the profession, and the precision of recollection may be improved in educators who can speak on their current classrooms. While teachers were the focus of this study, other adults in the educational environment, such as administrators (principals, counselors, etc.), would provide a more rounded picture of adult perspectives. The variety of participants' direct experience with foster served as a good foundation for capturing the spectrum of perceptions, but further research with more specific populations of educators—those with little to no interactions versus those many years of experience—would offer opportunities for comparative analyses as well as an exploration of the development of attitudes over time. While these limitations are present, the current study still provided great insight into the unexplored perceptions that educators hold towards foster youth.

Future studies should investigate the perceptions of other adults in the academic environment, and, more importantly, the felt impact of foster youth themselves. The reception of adult sentiments ultimately informs the image that foster youth understand

themselves to hold. These perspectives, whether positive or negative, may bolster or hinder a foster student's academic performance when coupled with their actual academic skill and personal motivation. A study that solicits the voice of foster youth would be incredibly valuable.

## CONCLUSION

This study clarifies some of the positions on foster youth that educators hold. Many teachers believe that they and their peers are poorly informed in an official capacity about the foster youth in their academic care. The lack of a formal policy surrounding disclosure of information on foster youth leads to disclosure methods that favor deficit views of foster youth, particularly around behavior. The lack of information about foster youth leads many educators to conflate their academic barriers with those of economically disadvantaged students in general. Although these two groups of students may outwardly appear similarly, the details and resulting effects of their lived experiences do differ. Ultimately, the misinformation that surrounds foster youth leads to a stigmatized identity for these students. The detrimental effects of this stigma include disproportionate disciplinary practices and the previously mentioned inattention to the unique barriers these students face.

These views are best combatted when teachers make the effort to personally connect with their students. The open environment created by such connections benefits both teacher and student. Such environments should be encouraged because disclosure most often comes from the students, and the process is made easier when the students have a trusted educator in whom to confide. We recommend practices that support teachers in making personal connections with their students, particularly foster youth, in order to gain accurately balanced perceptions of these students and support them emotionally and academically. In support of this goal, a program to improve teacher competency around foster youth follows in Appendix A.

## **Appendix A**

An Evaluation of a Teacher Training Program  
To Develop Competency Towards Foster Youth

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## **PART 1: PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

Children within the child welfare system face many challenges with their status as foster youth. I argue that there is a stigma associated with being in foster care. Foster youth are a frequently stigmatized group because people may consider them to be “damaged goods” who cannot be expected to excel academically or thrive developmentally. They need help dealing with this stigmatized identity. The degree of identification with this stigma may affect some students’ well-being, and the marginalization experienced by these students whose foster care status is known may be detrimental to their success in school. Foster youth need strong support systems both within the school environment and within their foster homes. They may struggle with constructive ways to handle their stigma. A school environment that is well trained to provide safe spaces for foster youth to discuss their situations for better emotional processing and more open, less marginalized treatment of foster youth status may help foster youth cope with the turmoil in their lives better and improve academic outcomes. Currently, many adults are ill informed on foster care in general.

A recent nationwide poll conducted by Harris Poll and commissioned by the National Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Association found that 83% of adults have little to no knowledge of what foster kids experience, and yet only 11% had any positive opinions about these kids (PR Newswire, 2014). As all adolescents are exploring their social worlds, their identities are strongly tied to the relationships they form with others (McMurry, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2010). A stable, safe

environment for stigma management may help foster kids develop more normally because they can talk about their experiences safely without feeling ridiculed.

### **Program Goals**

This proposal is designed as an intervention to provide middle and high school teachers with greater competency surrounding foster youth. With the skills from the program, teachers will be better able to assist foster youth in managing the stigma that surrounds them and creating safer environments in which they can develop healthy identities. This project aims to equip teachers to combat the false stigma that follows foster youth by correcting the misguided notions that other students, faculty, and staff within their schools may have about foster youth.

### **General Organization of Program**

The program will consist of five 1-hour training sessions for teachers within a pilot school. The school was chosen for its large number of foster youth, some of whom are known to the teachers, but many of whom are not. The program is for teachers, but a school with a large foster youth population would be ideal for testing the efficacy of the intervention because there already exists a large number of students who would ultimately benefit from more knowledge and supportive teachers. The modules for each training session will include brief lectures, group discussion, and interactive group activities.

### **First Order Outcomes**

At the end of the program, teachers will be more knowledgeable about the foster care system, including different types of substitute care placements (single family homes, group homes, residential treatment centers, kinship care, etc.). The teachers will also become more aware of any personal biases they may hold towards foster youth. The teachers will receive instruction in ways that foster youth may be personally managing their stigmatized identity in order to better understand what foster youth are dealing with. Furthermore, the teachers will gain skills in interacting with foster youth as well as dealing with other students who may be bullying foster youth. Teachers could decrease bullying of foster youth by explaining some aspects of the foster child experience to other students. They could also inform other teachers who have not had the program of ways to interact with the foster youth in their classrooms.

### **Second Order Outcomes**

With greater awareness of their own biases towards foster youth, teachers can work over time to address and reduce these biases. Foster youth within the school will also feel that the school has become a more inclusive environment because they have more teachers who understand their situations and are accommodating when necessary and available to talk knowledgeably with them.

### **Evaluation Approach**

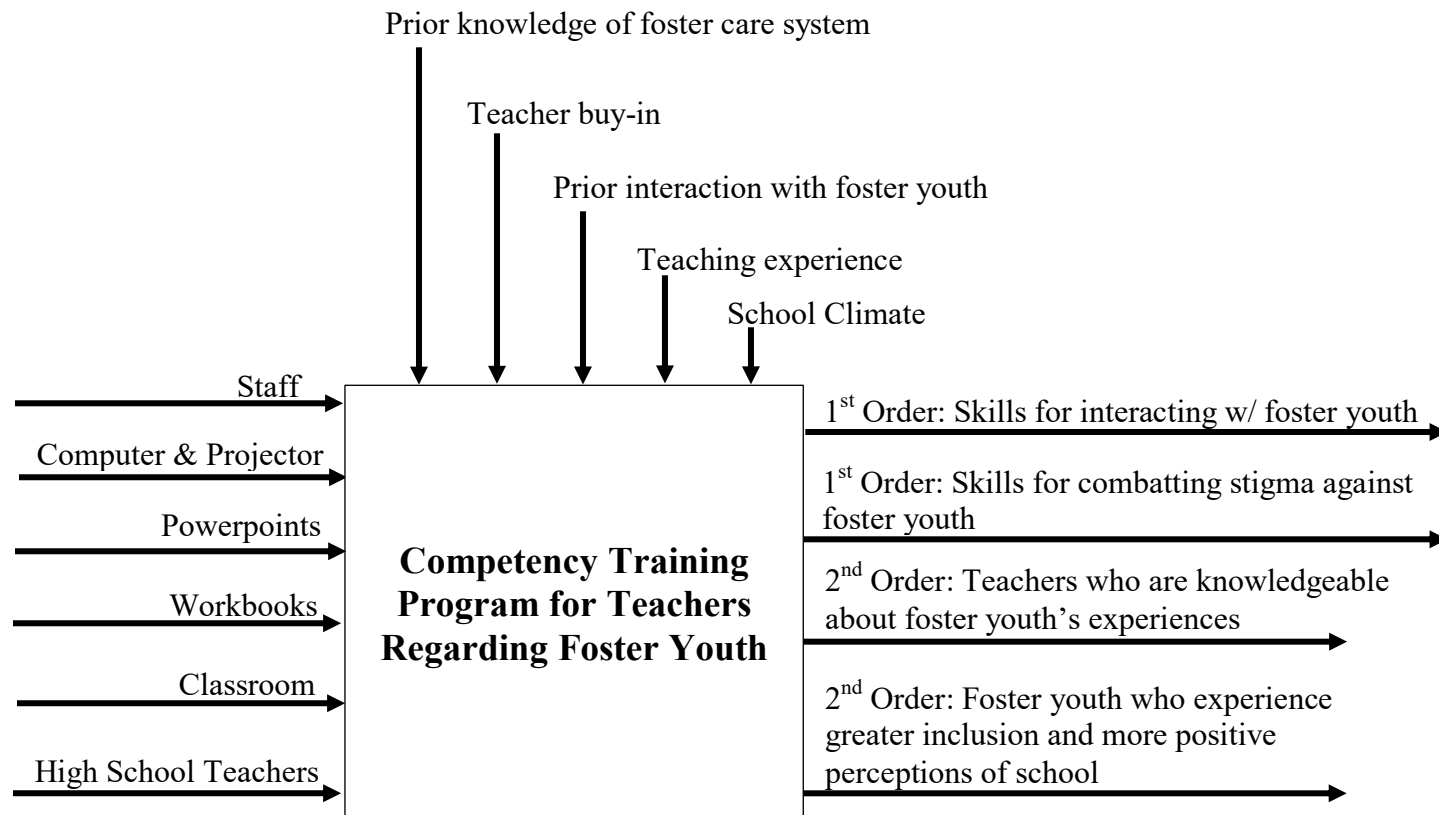
This project utilizes a value oriented evaluation approach because a need exists for changes in the way foster youth are treated in academic environments. The problem is that foster youth are often stigmatized by educators and peers, and these negative

perceptions lead to poor academic and developmental outcomes. This program is design to reduce the stigma surrounding foster youth by enabling teachers to have more positive interactions with the students and empower others – students, teachers, administrators – to do the same.



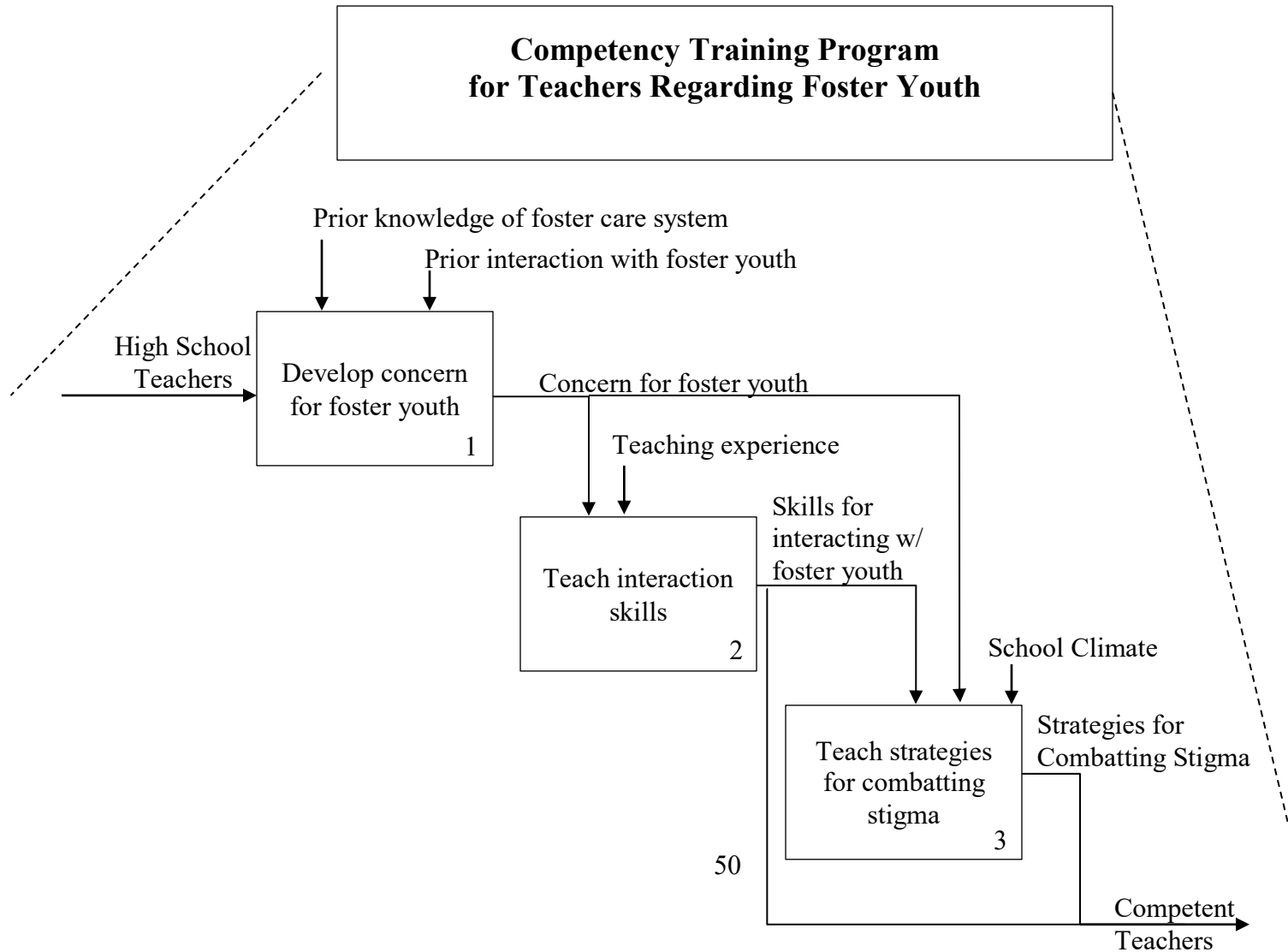
## PART 2: PROGRAM DECOMPOSITION

Diagram 1: Whole Program



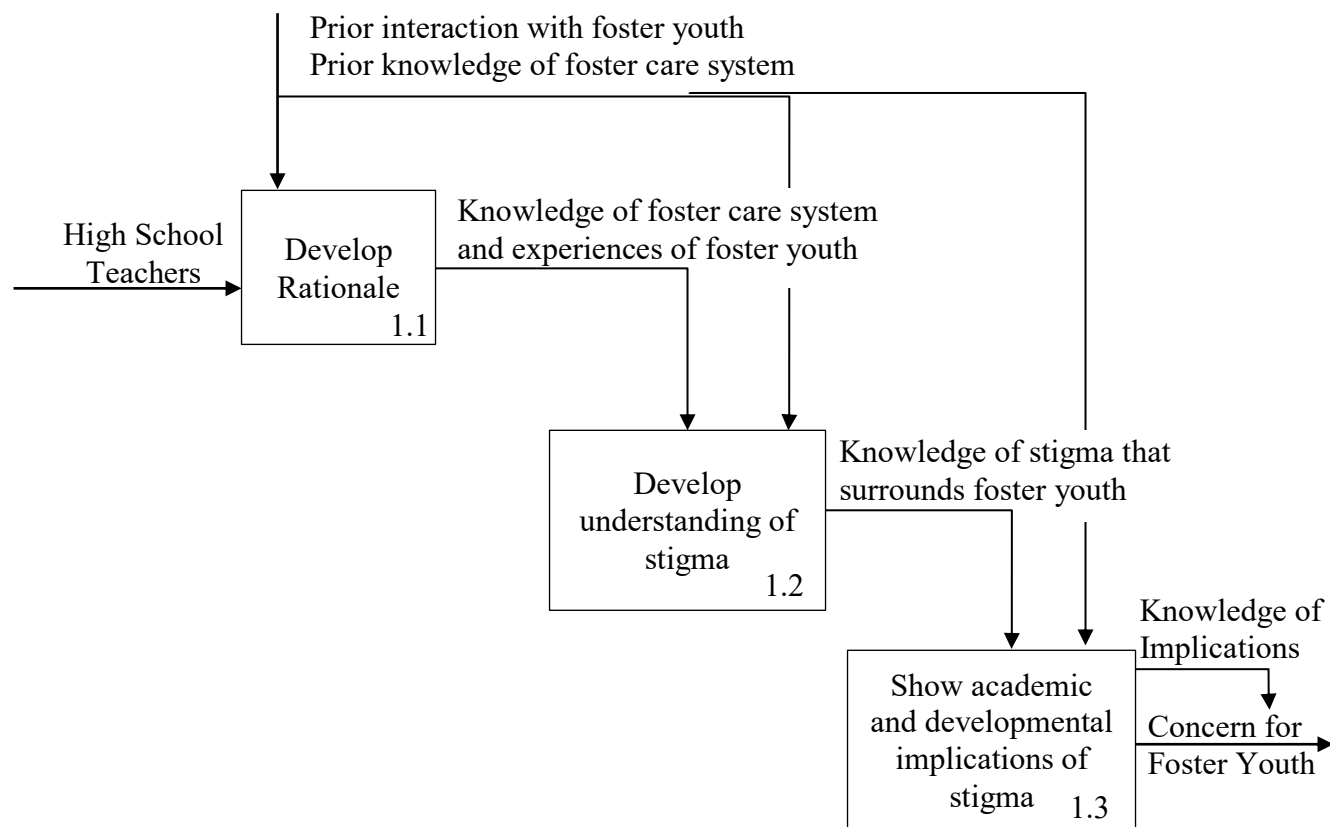
**Diagram 1 Description.** This program is designed to increase competency of high school teachers as they interact with foster youth. The program works with high school teachers using presentations and workbooks that inform the teachers of how the foster care system works, what youth who are involved in the system may be experiencing outside of school, and how those experiences may impact students' academic performance. The outcomes of the program are constrained by the teachers' prior knowledge of the foster care program and their interactions with foster youth, as well as the teachers' experience teaching. The teachers' willingness to participate and apply the information gained in the program also constrains outcomes. The school's climate and overall environment of acceptance and student-teacher communication are also constrains. After the program is complete, the teachers will gain knowledge about foster youth and the stigmatized label they often carry. This knowledge, along with skills training, will equip the teachers to better interact with foster youth and combat the negative perceptions that foster youth have.

**Diagram 2: Program Transactions**



**Diagram 2 Description.** This diagram details the necessary transactions to create competent high school teachers. First, the teachers must develop a concern for foster youth, which is constrained by the teachers' prior knowledge of the foster care system and prior interactions with foster youth. Second, the teachers must learn skills for interacting with foster youth based on their concern and current teaching experience. With these skills, the teachers will also learn skills for combatting the negative perceptions of foster youth. Ultimately, these skills and knowledge will lead to more competent teachers who are equipped to dispel false notions of foster youth.

**Diagram 3: Sample Breakdown of Transaction 1 (Develop Concern for Foster Youth)**



**Diagram 3 Description.** Diagram 3 details the components of the first transaction: Develop Concern for Foster Youth. In this transaction, teachers first develop a rationale for understanding foster youth by gaining knowledge on the foster care system in general as well as knowledge about the experiences of foster youth in different substitute care placements. With this knowledge, the teachers are then exposed to the stigmatized identity that many foster youth face. They learn different ways that foster youth may be stigmatized by being treated as damaged goods or somehow to blame for the maltreatment they suffered. With awareness of this stigma, the teachers then learn about the negative impact that a stigmatized identity has on foster youth's academic achievement and their adolescent development. These steps together will develop within teachers a concern for foster youth.

### **PART 3: STAKEHOLDER QUESTIONS**

#### **Administrators (Principal, Assistant Principal, Administrative Coordinator)**

1. Will time spent on discussing foster youth interfere with instruction and other necessary parts of classroom time?
  - A. Classroom instruction time before and after program implementation
  - B. Number of minutes during each class period spent on instruction
  - C. T-test of instruction time before program was implemented vs after
2. Will teachers be willing to participate in the program?
  - A. Teacher satisfaction with program
  - B. Likert-type ratings and qualitative measure of teacher satisfaction after program completion
    - i. On a scale of 1-7, how much do you feel this program has been a good use your time?
    - ii. On a scale of 1-7, how helpful do you feel this program has been?
    - iii. On a scale of 1-7, how likely are you to recommend this program to other teachers?
    - iv. Could you describe some ways this program will be useful to you and other teachers?
  - C. Average rating scores; coding of qualitative question for common themes on times when program could be useful, people with whom program skills

can be useful, novel ideas for program usefulness not commonly discussed  
by many participants

### 3. Demographics

#### A. School Characteristics

- i. Setting – Zip Code + Rating (Urban, Suburban, Rural)
- ii. Ethnic Composition – Percentages by race/ethnicity
- iii. Parental Income Composition – Low, Middle, High, Diverse
- iv. Type – Public, Private, Charter, etc
- v. Total Student Count
- vi. Foster Youth Count
- vii. Teacher Count

#### B. Administrator Characteristics

- i. Age, Gender, Ethnicity
- ii. Role – Principal, Assistant Principal, Administrative Coordinator,  
Department Chair, etc
- iii. Years of tenure in profession
- iv. Years of tenure at current school

### **Teachers**

1. How useful will this program be for me?

#### A. Teacher competence



B. Likert-type rating scale of teacher competence before and after completing program

- i. On a scale of 1-7, how confident do you feel in your ability to have positive interactions with foster youth after completing this program?
- ii. On a scale of 1-7, how likely will you be to seek out opportunities to talk about foster youth with other teachers?
- iii. On a scale of 1-7, how likely will you be to seek out opportunities to talk about foster youth with students?
- iv. On a scale of 1-7, how confidence to you feel in your ability to address bullying of foster youth when it happens?
- v. On a scale of 1-7, how informed are you on the foster care system in general?

C. Dependent measures t-test of scores before and after program

2. Will this program help me with classroom management and discipline?

A. Disciplinary actions of teacher

B. Researcher observations (counting system) of number and type of disciplinary actions in each classroom period, measured a regular intervals before (to establish baseline), during (to measure progressive change), and after (to measure result) program

<i>Please mark how often each of the following disciplinary actions occurs:</i>	
Verbal reprimand with no further action	
Written demerit or note of misconduct with no further action	
Office referral	

- C. T-test of total disciplinary actions before and after program as well as analysis of change over time of disciplinary actions

### 3. Demographics

- A. Age, Gender, Ethnicity
- B. Subject taught
- C. Years of tenure in profession
- D. Years of tenure at current school
- E. Interactions with known foster youth (Yes/No)

### **Parents**

1. Will my child learn skills in interacting with foster youth?
  - A. Student knowledge and skills
  - B. Likert-type rating scale of student knowledge and skills before and after completing program
    - i. On a scale of 1-7, do you think your school has prepared you to interact with students who are foster youth?

- ii. On a scale of 1-7, how likely will you be to seek out opportunities to talk about foster youth with teachers?
    - iii. On a scale of 1-7, how likely will you be to seek out opportunities to talk about foster youth with other students?
  - C. Dependent measures t-test of scores before and after program
- 2. Will this training mean that foster youth are getting more classroom time and attention than my child?
  - A. Individual student-teacher time
  - B. Number of minutes spent with foster students vs non-foster students; quality of time from student's perspective (Do you think your teacher gives you enough attention in the classroom when you need help or have questions? Yes or No)
  - C. T-test of time spent with student by student type before and after program; comparison of yes/no responses by student type before and after program
- 3. Demographics
  - A. Age, Gender, Ethnicity
  - B. Foster Parent Status (Yes/No)
  - C. Household Income
  - D. Marital Status
  - E. Children – total in home, total enrolled at school of interest
  - F. Total estimated hours/month of contact with school personnel

## **Foster Youth**

1. How much will other people know about me, good and bad?
  - A. Knowledge of general details on foster youth and personal details on each foster student in particular; school satisfaction
  - B. Qualitative assessment of the types of things teachers choose to share with each other and other students and the effect on students via interviews with teachers and students
    - i. To Teachers: When you talk to foster youth, what do you tell them that you already know how about them? Do you ask them personal questions? Why or why not?
    - ii. To Teachers: When you talk to other teachers about foster youth, what sorts of details about the students do you share? Are they mostly positive, negative, or a mixture? Do you share your personal opinion or just facts of the case?
    - iii. To Non-Foster Students: How much do you know about particular foster youth in your school? Is your perception mostly positive, negative, neutral, or mixed? How did you find out what you know?
    - iv. To Foster Students: How do you think the program has impacted how teachers interact with you? Are there certain things you wish teachers knew about you? Are there things you don't want teachers to know? Are there things you want certain teachers to know but

not share with others? How should teachers communicate to you that they understand and know certain things without revealing those things to others?

- C. Coding for themes from interviews surrounding topics of discussion, topics that are considered taboo or off limits, discussion of opinions vs factors, student and teacher perceptions of foster youth, teacher decision making on what and how to share

2. Will this help me fit in at school?

A. Student school satisfaction

B. Likert-type scale of school satisfaction rating

Check the box that matches how you feel about the following statements.	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Students in my school make me feel welcome.					
2. Adults in my school make me feel welcome.					
3. My school is kept neat and clean.					
4. My school is safe and secure.					
5. Students in my school care about me.					
6. Adults in my school care about me.					
7. Students in my school treat me with respect.					
8. Adults in my school treat students with respect.					
9. I get help when I need it in my school.					
10. I understand the rules for appropriate behavior in my school.					
11. The rules in my school are fair for all students.					
12. I am satisfied with the effort I put into my school work.					
13. I am satisfied with my school.					
14. I am learning in school.					

C. Dependent measures t-test of scores before and after program

4. Demographics (Gathered from foster parent and caseworker)
  - A. Age, Gender, Ethnicity
  - B. Foster care entry characteristics – age and reason
  - C. Substitute placement characteristics – number, type, and duration, reason for disruption (if applicable)
  - D. Number of schools attended to determine school stability
  - E. Special Education Considerations (No OR Yes w/ detail)

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