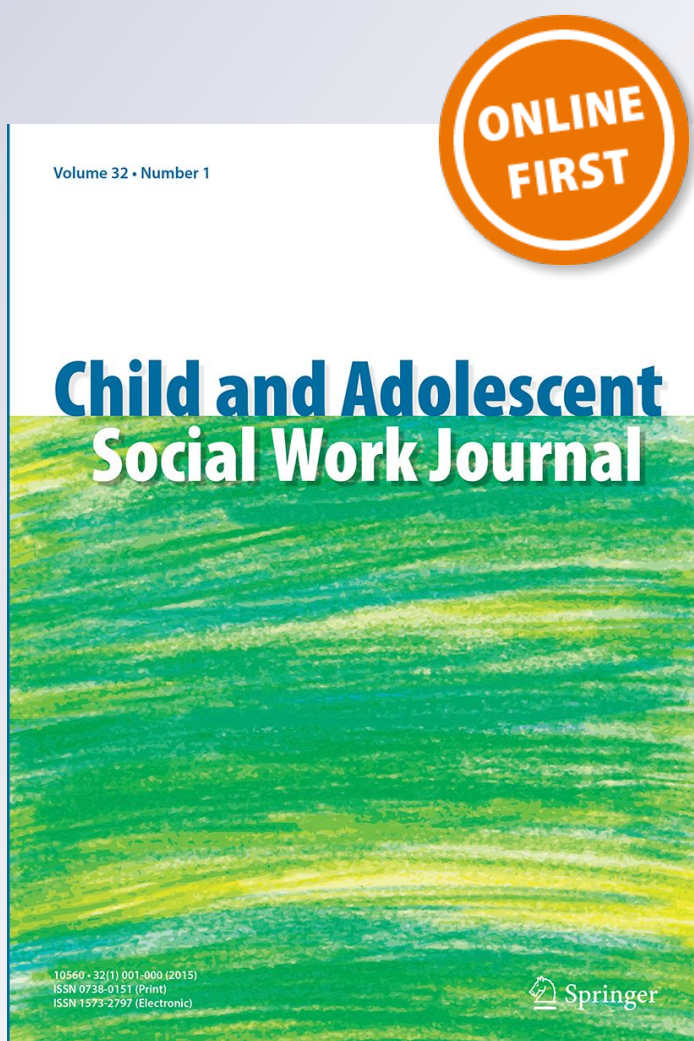# Foster Youth's Educational Challenges and Supports: Perspectives of Teachers, Foster Parents, and Former Foster Youth

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Foster Youth's Educational Challenges and Supports: Perspectives of Teachers, Foster Parents, and Former Foster Youth

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Abstract

Research indicates that children in foster care are more likely than their non-foster care peers to be absent from school, have special education needs, and to experience traumatic life events. In turn, they are also less likely to graduate high school and to attend/graduate from college. The current study, which builds on this literature and was guided by an ecological framework, employed thematic analysis to explore Massachusetts foster youth's academic challenges and supports through interviews with teachers ($n = 19$), foster parents ($n = 14$), former foster youth ($n = 12$), and three individuals who were both teachers and foster parents. All three groups of participants noted that strained relationships between foster youth and their schools contributed to academic challenges. In addition, foster parents and teachers described challenges within the school/home relationship. Participants offered insights into how foster youth can be supported academically (e.g., support for foster parents navigating special education services, enhancing extracurricular opportunities). Significantly, many of their suggestions are in fact already available, suggesting that increased awareness of and utilization of these resources have the potential to increase positive outcomes for foster youth.

Keywords Foster care · Education · Adolescent · Policy

Youth in foster care face disparate educational outcomes compared to their peers (e.g., school attendance, special education needs, and high school graduation rates have been shown to be worse for foster youth (Castrechini, 2009; Hill & Koester, 2015; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). Little research has explored the barriers to, or strategies for, successful school experiences from the perspective of youth themselves or adults who are closely involved with their educational needs (i.e., teachers and foster parents). The current qualitative study utilizes interviews with teachers, foster parents, and foster care alumni to explore educational challenges that foster youth face, as well as strategies and supports they view as effective in enhancing foster youth's educational experiences. This study builds on prior literature that has explored the educational experiences of foster youth by providing specific recommendations for practice and policy changes that are rooted in direct suggestions and experiences of former foster youth, teachers, and foster parents.

Youth in Care: Educational and Psychosocial Outcomes

Over the past 25 years, there have been significant advances in policies intended to improve educational outcomes for foster youth (e.g., Foster Care Independence Act, 1999; Education and Training Vouchers Program, 2002). The 2008 Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act aimed to limit the number of school transitions for foster children and to work with schools to expedite the transfer of school records when a student must move to a new school (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2008). More recently, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) delineated the educational system's responsibility for ensuring school stability and immediate school enrollment for children in foster care as well as establishing points of contact within the child welfare system and educational system to increase communication between agencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Furthermore, the ESSA requires schools to collect and report academic achievement data for children in foster care. Additionally, at the time of this study, Massachusetts offered a living stipend to youth aging out of foster care from the ages of 18 to 23 if they

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attended school or a vocational program and met with social workers regularly as well as a full tuition waiver to attend a Massachusetts public university or community college (Massachusetts DCF, 2015).

Despite advances in both federal and state foster care policies, youth in care continue to face educational and psychosocial barriers. In her extensive review of federal policies and associated educational and psychosocial outcomes, Stott (2013) reported that youth who aged out of foster care have not made significant improvements compared to previous cohorts of foster youth in educational attainment, employment, or income, in the past 25 years. Approximately 50% of youth in foster care graduate from high school by the time they are 18, compared to 82% of the general population of high school students (Wolanin, 2005). Furthermore, although 84% of foster youth express a desire to attend college, only 20% of former foster youth actually enroll in college, compared to 60% of the general population (Wolanin, 2005) and an even smaller percentage of former foster youth (between 2 and 9%) graduate from college with a bachelor's degree (Courtney et al., 2011; Pecora et al., 2006).

A multitude of factors may contribute to the lower likelihood that children with a history of living in foster care will graduate from high school and college. Foster youth are more likely than the general population of youth to receive special education services (Castrechini, 2009; Courtney, Terao, & Bost, 2004), to be absent from school (Zetlin et al., 2010), be suspended from school (Courtney, Roderick, Smithgall, Gladden, & Nagaoka, 2004), drop out of high school, and have lower grades (Smithgall, Gladden, Howard, Goerge, & Courtney, 2004). They are also more likely to repeat a grade (Courtney, Terao, et al., 2004; Pecora et al., 2006). Even with advancements in policies, there is recognition that much more needs to be done a) in the classroom and b) in the home to improve educational outcomes for foster youth.

Teachers' Roles in Foster Youth's Schooling

Educators play an important role in the lives and success of all youth, including foster youth (Courtney, Roderick, et al., 2004). Children in foster care show lower academic test scores as early as their elementary school years, making it difficult to close the achievement gap between them and their non-foster care peers as they grow up (Courtney, Roderick, et al., 2004; Henderson, Gaston, Kingsley, Lezin, & Siri, 2010). Furthermore, children in care often exhibit learning, behavioral, and emotional problems that may affect their relationships with teachers, which in turn may affect their academic success.

Both Watson-Davis (2009) and Zetlin et al. (2012) have reported that common classroom challenges faced by

teachers with students in foster care include learning disabilities, emotional and behavioral outbursts, and difficulty forming positive peer relationships (Zetlin, MacLeod, & Kimm, 2012). In their study, Zetlin and colleagues used open- and close-ended survey questions to assess new teachers' experiences with students in foster care. Teachers described the children's "roller coaster emotions" (Zetlin et al., 2012; p. 9) and unpredictability as extremely difficult to manage. A likely contribution to foster youth's "roller coaster emotions" is their higher rates of trauma and adverse childhood experiences (e.g., abuse, neglect, separation from family; Cole et al., 2009). Indeed, numerous empirical studies and reviews have reported the mental health barriers related to foster youth's traumatic life experiences on their academic achievement (e.g., Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Morton, 2015, 2018; O'Higgins, Sebba, & Gardner, 2017; Rios & Rocco, 2013). According to teachers, additional barriers to student success include foster parents' lack of willingness or availability to discuss children's behavior, inadequate monitoring of homework by foster parents, and lack of preparation for school (Zetlin et al., 2010, 2012). Thus, for teachers, children's behavioral and socioemotional challenges and a lack of accessibility by foster parents are two key barriers to supporting foster youth.

Foster Parents' Experiences with Schools

In addition to teacher-student relationships, parental engagement in children's schooling has notable benefits for children. For instance, parents' involvement in school has been positively linked to student motivation and engagement in school (Fall & Roberts, 2012) and overall academic success (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Wang, 2015). Several extensive reviews of the literature on foster youth's educational attainment have highlighted the positive impact of foster parent's high academic expectations, school involvement, and academic support on foster youth's academic success (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; O'Higgins et al., 2017; Pecora, 2012). Furthermore, in their 2012 study of 687 Canadian youth in care, Cheung and colleagues concluded that 15% of the variance in youth academic achievement could be attributed to differences between foster home environments. Specifically, they found that youth in foster homes with caregivers who provided more academic support and higher expectations were more likely to succeed in school (Cheung, Lwin, & Jenkins, 2012).

Echoing the research gap on teachers' perspectives on school experiences for children in foster care, there is also a dearth of research on *foster parents'* perspectives on the educational experiences of children in care. One exception is the study by Zetlin et al. (2010), in which foster parents, school liaisons, and educational advocates participated in focus

groups to share their views regarding the school experiences of foster youth. Foster caregivers described feeling disappointed by a perceived lack of guidance from schools for foster youth overall, particularly in relation to graduation and post-graduation plans. Foster parents discussed their desire for schools to engage foster youth in discussion and education about graduation requirements prior to graduation to ensure that the youth meet such requirements. In addition, foster parents expressed that they would like schools to assist the children with college and financial aid applications to enhance the likelihood that they will attend post-secondary education (Zetlin et al., 2010). Thus, an area of concern for foster parents of adolescents is schools' seemingly lack of support in the post-high school transition for students in foster care.

Because foster families share some characteristics with adoptive families (e.g., non-biological connection between parents and children; involvement with the social welfare system), it is worth considering the adoption literature when examining foster caregivers' experiences with schools. Goldberg (2014) interviewed 266 parents whose adopted children (many of whom were adopted via foster care) were preschool-aged about their school experiences. Parents emphasized challenges in schools related to their family structure, such as teachers' lack of understanding of the adoption process, use of insensitive language, and ignorance regarding adoption in general (misunderstanding types of adoption, assignment of family tree exercises, etc.). Further, parents noted that teachers "did not get" (p. 676) how to handle their child's behavioral challenges that were connected to their trauma history (e.g., they isolated children as a punishment for poor classroom behavior, which only exacerbated children's feelings of abandonment or mistreatment). In a later study, Goldberg, Frost, and Black (2017) interviewed adoptive parents, many of whom adopted via foster care, with children in elementary school, and found that one-third reported that they had to "fight" for appropriate special education assessments and services for their children In sum, caregivers in families formed through foster care and adoption have reported challenges with schools ranging from teacher insensitivity and inappropriate classroom behavior management techniques to inadequate special education services and post-secondary educational support. These studies demonstrate that school-related challenges for caregivers of children involved in the foster care system begin in preschool and persist throughout high school.

Foster Youth's Perspectives on School Experiences

A number of studies (e.g., Del Quest, Fullerton, Geenen, Powers, & The Research Consortium to Increase the Success of Youth in Foster Care, 2012; Havalchak et al., 2009; Martin & Jackson, 2002; Tilbury, Creed, Buys, & Crawford, 2011) have used focus groups, interviews, and surveys with youth in care to explore their insights regarding their educational experiences. Using focus group data from 27 adolescents in foster care, Hudson (2013) reported that youth were aware of the stereotype (and, for some, the reality) that foster youth usually do not attend higher education, but become incarcerated, homeless, pregnant, or addicted to substances when they emancipate from care.

Significantly, adolescent foster youth have expressed that they need help from adults to achieve their goals (Cheung et al., 2012; Del Quest et al., 2012; Hedin, Hojer, & Brunnberg, 2011; Hudson, 2013, Rios & Rocco, 2013). Clemens et al. (2017) described the implicit and explicit messages from teachers and parents that former foster youth perceived as particularly harmful. The young adults in their study explained that they did not feel that adults recognized their school successes, that they were deemed worthless, and that they were told that their educational opportunities were limited because they were in foster care.

Furthermore, youth in care have reported feeling that adults in their lives have low academic expectations for them (Clemens et al., 2017; Del Quest et al., 2012; Martin & Jackson, 2002, Rios & Rocco, 2013). They report that caregivers, teachers, and caseworkers focus more on their behavioral challenges than their successes (Tilbury et al., 2011). Despite these reported low expectations, youth in care express that they enjoy school and want to do well in school (Hedin, Hojer, & Brumberg, 2011; Martin & Jackson, 2002). They tend to describe wanting "the good life" (Hudson, 2013, p. 135) and report high expectations for their education and adult lives (Havalchak et al., 2009).

Foster youth have also described wanting mentors who listened to their concerns and held an authority figure status— someone that they could not "run all over" (Hudson, 2013, p. 134). Echoing this need, Stott (2013) has argued that youth who emancipate from the foster care system likely experience negative outcomes such as low educational attainment, incarceration, and homelessness because they often lack the social capital and basic skills necessary to access services and support as adults. Thus, the research in this area generally suggests that although foster youth often aspire to achieve strong academic performance, they face a number of challenges when it comes to school success, including lacking proper guidance from teachers, feeling as though adults have low expectations for them, and difficulties forming relationships with their teachers.

The Current Study

This study draws from ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1995) and builds on existing empirical research to examine the educational barriers as well as strategies that have been helpful for foster youth to attain academic success. According to an ecological perspective, individuals are impacted by direct (i.e., microsystem) and indirect (e.g., mesosystem) contact with their environment. In this study, we recognize and highlight that youth's academic and socioemotional outcomes are shaped by many contextual systems, including their direct relationship with schools and their foster parents, as well as the indirect impact of the relationships between their foster parents and schools. Prior research (e.g., Clemens et al., 2017; Del Quest et al., 2012; Rios & Rocco, 2013) has focused on the direct relationships that affect foster youth's experiences in schools. Less is known about the impact of the more distal contexts (Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012). Therefore, we interview foster care alumni, foster parents, and teachers to explore factors that contribute to foster youth's academic experiences, with particular attention paid to how these systems interact. Our research questions are:

1. What are foster youth's educational challenges and supports at the microsystem level (i.e., foster youth–school relationship)?
2. What are foster youth's educational challenges and supports at the mesosystem level (i.e., foster parent–school relationship)?

Method

Recruitment

Forty-eight participants (19 teachers, 14 foster parents, 12 young adults who aged out of foster care—i.e., "foster care alumni"—and three individuals who were both teachers and foster parents) took part in semi-structured interviews regarding the school experiences of youth in foster care. We recruited teachers, foster parents, and youth from across Massachusetts, including rural, suburban, and urban areas. Participant eligibility included: English fluency, telephone and email access, and residency (or employment, among teachers) in Massachusetts.

We implemented snowball sampling to recruit all three participant groups. Teachers were recruited mainly via email, either directly to the teacher or through a third party (principal, teacher union, teacher group online). Teachers were also recruited via social media and word-of-mouth.

Recruitment criteria were that all teachers were currently working in a middle or high school in Massachusetts, and that they had experience with at least one student in foster care.

We recruited foster parents and foster care alumni via contact with nonprofit community agencies, postings in newsletters, postings online, direct email, and word-of-mouth. Foster parents were required to have had experience caring for at least one child in middle school or high school. Recruitment criteria for young adults were: age 18 to 25; spent at least 6 months in Massachusetts foster care; and were in foster care at the age of 18, when they were given the option to remain in DCF custody (with the provision that they follow the DCF requirements of regular meetings with a social worker as well as full time attendance in college or a vocational program) and to receive financial assistance from DCF until they turn 22 years old.

Participants

Teachers

Demographic information (age, gender, race/ethnicity, and education level) for all participants is included in Table 1. The current study included 22 teachers, who had been in their profession for an average of 18.32 years ($SD = 10.14$). Most of the teachers were currently teaching at a middle school ($n = 11$; 50%) or high school ($n = 10$; 49%). One teacher (1%) was currently teaching at an elementary school. Some teachers ($n = 7$; 32%) had experience teaching at more than one school level and all teachers had taught at the middle school or high school level at some point in their careers. The content area taught by teachers varied (electives, $n = 8$; mainstream core courses, $n = 6$; special education, $n = 6$; English Language Learners, $n = 2$). All teachers were employed by public schools. Most ($n = 16$, 73%) were teaching at a traditional public school, three (14%) were teaching at an alternative school, two (9%) were teaching at a vocational school, and one (4%) was currently at a traditional school but had taught at an alternative school in the recent past.

Three teachers were also foster parents at the time of the interview, another teacher was a foster child as an infant, and an additional 10 teachers had some other connection to foster care (e.g., via a friend or extended family member). Thus, 14 (64%) had a personal connection to foster care.

Foster Parents

Of the 17 foster parents, three were also teachers. Most ($n = 13$; 77%) were married and/or parenting with a partner. Foster parents had been taking care of children in foster care for an average of 10.31 years ($SD = 10.63$;

Table 1 Demographic data by group

	Teachers ($n=22$)[a]	Foster parents ($n=17$)	Former foster youth ($n=12$)
Age (years)	$M=50.67$ ($SD=8.90$)	$M=53.53$ ($SD=10.27$)	$M=20.08$ ($SD=2.07$)
Gender			
Women	$n=19$ (86%)	$n=16$ (94%)	$n=7$ (58%)
Men	$n=3$ (14%)	$n=1$ (6%)	$n=5$ (42%)
Race/ethnicity			
White	$n=20$ (90%)	$n=14$ (82%)	$n=4$ (33%)
African American	$n=1$ (5%)	$n=3$ (18%)	$n=2$ (17%)
Latino/a	$n=1$ (5%)	–	$n=4$ (33%)
Other	–	–	$n=2$ (17%)
Education level			
Doctoral degree	$n=2$ (9%)	$n=1$ (6%)	–
Master's degree	$n=14$ (64%)	$n=4$ (23%)	–
Bachelor's degree	$n=5$ (23%)	$n=8$ (47%)	–
Some college (in progress)	–	–	$n=9$ (75%)
Some college (in past)	–	$n=2$ (12%)	–
High school diploma	$n=1$ (4%)[b]	$n=2$ (12%)	$n=3$ (25%)[c]
Geographic location by DCF Regional Office			
Boston	–	2 (12%)	5 (42%)
Western Massachusetts	13 (59%)	2 (12%)	–
Southern Massachusetts	2 (9%)	5 (29%)	7 (58%)
Northern Massachusetts	7 (32%)	8 (47%)	–

[a]Three teachers were also foster parents and are included in both the teacher and foster parent columns

[b]The teacher with a high school diploma was also currently in a teacher certification program

[c]One foster youth was currently in high school, on track to receive their diploma

Median=8.00 years), with a range of one year to 40 years. Foster parents had taken care of a median of 10 children throughout that time (range: 1 child to 600 children). Six (35%) of the foster parents had also adopted at least one child via the foster care system and one (6%) of the foster parents was in foster care as a child.

Young Adults

Nine of the young adults were between 18 and 20, two were 21–23, and one was between 24 and 25 years old. One of the young adults was raising their biological child. Five (42%) were living independently in an apartment, whereas others lived on a college campus ($n=2$; 17%), in an independent living home with other young adults ($n=2$; 17%), in a homeless shelter ($n=2$; 17%), and with their foster family ($n=1$, 8%).

All of the young adults had emancipated from foster care and "signed back in" when they turned 18 (i.e., none had been adopted by foster families or reunited with their biological families). One participant had subsequently aged out of DCF care at the age of 22, meaning that they no longer qualified for financial assistance from DCF and were no longer required to meet regularly with a DCF social worker.

Participants reported a variety of reasons for having been placed in foster care. Most ($n=8$; 67%) reported that DCF placed them in foster care because their biological parents were abusive and/or neglectful. Two (17%) said they had requested that DCF remove them from their parents' homes and place them into foster care, and two (17%) stated that their biological parents requested foster care placement. The youth entered foster care at the average age of 14 ($SD=3.44$) and had lived in an average of 3.82 ($SD=3.28$) placements while in the state's custody.

Procedure

The primary author interviewed all participants via telephone. Teacher interviews ranged from 22 to 85 min ($M=51$). Foster parent interviews were 30–80 min, ($M=54$). Young adult interviews ranged from 24 to 54 min ($M=36$).

Interview questions were informed by prior research (Martin & Jackson, 2002; Watson-Davis, 2009; Zetlin et al., 2010, 2012) and ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), and formulated to inform a deeper understanding of the school experiences of foster care alumni. Questions focused on educational challenges and what participants viewed as helpful for students in foster care. Examples of

questions for teachers included: (a) Tell me about the foster child(ren) you have had in your class (probes: How did you know they were in foster care? What were their behaviors like? How did those children relate to peers?). (b) What was your teaching style/approach with the child(ren) in foster care? (probes: Was it different from your approach with other children? Why/Why not? How?) (c) What have your experiences with foster parents been like? (probes: What has been challenging? How have they been helpful?) (d) What supports, services, or training have you received that was focused on children and families involved with foster care and adoption?

Questions for foster parents were similar but tailored to the perspective of foster parents rather than teachers (e.g., Tell me about your experiences with teachers. How have teachers treated the children in your care?). Teachers who were also foster parents were asked about the school experience of children in foster care from their perspectives both as teachers and as foster parents.

Finally, examples of questions for former foster youth included: (a) Tell me about your school experiences (probes: What did you like about school? What was hard about school? Who were your main supports in school?) (b) How did teachers treat you while you were in foster care? (c) What have been the challenges you have faced regarding school?

Each interview was semi-structured; participants could deviate from the specific interview questions as they chose and subsequent probes were utilized when this occurred. For instance, some young adults chose to delve more deeply into their traumatic histories than others. We followed up with probes about how they believed that the trauma may have affected their educational experiences, thereby keeping to the overarching focus of the project.

This study was approved by the [blinded] human subjects review board. Participants provided informed consent online, via Qualtrics. We provided the young adults with a $25 gift card as compensation. We entered teachers and foster parents into a lottery to win a $50 gift card. We sent gift card codes via email to ensure participant confidentiality. We provided former foster youth with more compensation than other participants because (a) they were more difficult to recruit than teachers and foster parents (i.e., the population of former foster youth who met eligibility requirements for this study was smaller than that of eligible teachers and foster parents and there were more formal groups dedicated to supporting teachers and foster parents than former foster youth that could disseminate information about this study) and (b) we felt that it was appropriate because former foster youth are an especially vulnerable population in comparison to the other participant groups.

Data Analysis

We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012), informed by an ecological systems perspective (Bronfenbrenner, 1986, 1995) to analyze the data. Throughout the coding process, we also considered our own perspectives and discussed possible biases related to our own experiences with parenting, educational systems, and foster care (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). The primary author was a doctoral graduate student at the time of analysis and a parent of two children adopted from foster care. The secondary author was a faculty member and a parent of a biological child. Both authors had been formally trained in qualitative methods. All data were deidentified, transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned.

Initially, both authors collaborated to organize the data into broad categories to begin to formulate a coding scheme. The primary author then coded all of the interviews and met with the second author on a weekly basis to review and refine codes. We took an iterative approach whereby as new codes emerged, all interviews that were previously coded were re-coded to ensure that all relevant data were consistently analyzed according to the same coding scheme. Finally, we combined codes and developed comprehensive themes to capture the overarching patterns that emerged from the data (Clarke & Braun, 2013). NVivo software was used to organize the data.

Once all interviews were coded new themes and codes ceased to emerge, a doctoral student familiar with thematic analysis, ecological systems theory, and foster care, independently coded six randomly selected interviews (two from each participant group) using the coding scheme to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. After this first phase of coding, inter-coder agreement was 75%. We used the ratio of code agreement to disagreement for this measurement. Discrepancies were discussed with the authors and we reached consensus after considering our theoretical lens and research questions. After the outside coder coded an additional six interviews, 80% inter-coder agreement was achieved. At this point, the thematic analysis was deemed reliable and valid because the primary investigator (a) relied on the literature to develop the codes and themes, (b) sought consultation with two independent sources at separate stages of data analysis, and (c) 80% inter-coder agreement was reached across over 20% of the interviews, which has been established as standard protocol (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe, 2012).

Results

Teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth described the educational barriers and supports that foster youth encounter. We analyzed participants' responses with an

ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) to determine the (a) Challenges and Supports in the Youth-School Relationship (Microsystem) and (b) Challenges and Supports in the Foster Home-School Relationship (Mesosystem). Challenges in the Youth-School Relationship included differential treatment, teacher misunderstanding, and school is not a priority. Challenges in the Foster Parent–School Relationship included complexity of accommodations, strained relationships with teachers, and lack of school–home partnership.

Challenges in the Youth-School Relationship (Microsystem)

Most teachers ($n = 18$; 82%), foster parents ($n = 14$; 82%), and former foster youth ($n = 8$; 67%) shared the opinion that foster youth's strained relationships with their schools creates a barrier to their academic success. This disconnect between foster youth and schools occurs for several reasons, according to participants. Specifically, they described the following challenges to foster youth's ability to form strong relationships with schools, which in turn impeded their academic success: differential treatment (lower academic expectations, pity), misunderstanding/lack of trauma-sensitive approach, and need to prioritize other life circumstances ahead of education.

Differential Treatment: Lower Expectations

Foster parents, teachers, and former foster youth shared the perception that teachers often appear to have low(er) expectations for foster youth's abilities and performance in school. Foster parents explained that they wished that their children were treated with the same expectations as children living with their biological parents; they wanted their children to be *inspired* to be their best, rather than being allowed to *float* through the system to graduation. Jerome, a foster father, expressed:

> Johnny needs to read at the fourth-grade level, by the fourth grade. Not just pass him on… And in a lot of ways, the schools have failed to realize that, particularly when it comes to foster children because the expectations are very low when it comes to foster kids.

He went on to say that rather than to express sympathy or pity to foster children, teachers should, "… build them up, make them feel like they can conquer the world."

On a similar note, teachers expressed frustration with co-workers and administration who pressure them to promote students, regardless of whether they have grasped the material. This reveals how teachers faced pressure from broader systems which in turn likely affected the quality of education that foster youth received. Ken, a vocational high school teacher, exclaimed, "It's 'sweep 'em under the rug, make

sure they graduate, so our graduate numbers are up,' you know, and— 'The hell with the kid and the rest of their life!'" Ken and others described a school environment where it felt that the school's reputation and graduation rates were prioritized over ensuring that students in foster care learn the material necessary for success, which has long-term impacts on foster youth's outcomes.

Differential Treatment: Pity

Most former foster youth also expressed feeling that teachers treated them differently from other students, specifically with pity, which led to a non-existent or at least more distant relationship with their educators than their peers who were not in foster care. Lauren, a former foster youth, explained that the pity she experienced from her teachers because she was in foster care contributed to her lack of trust in them. She said, "That shit [pity] makes it [school] worse so I wouldn't even like—I don't—I don't trust teachers." Two youth noted that they felt embarrassed when teachers would treat them like a "charity case" by bringing them second-hand clothing.

In contrast, Layla, a former foster youth, described being recognized at her high school graduation by teachers for her achievements in school and how it impacted her in a positive way. She described the event:

> The teachers select three students and I was one of them… they just talked about some of my obstacles and how I overcame them. They gave me a flower. That made me feel happy that out of so many kids, I was one of the ones that got picked to be talked about.

Layla's narrative demonstrates how foster youth can feel more connected to their schools when teachers recognize their efforts, despite their struggles, rather than express pity.

Teacher Misunderstanding: Lack of Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Teachers' misinterpretation of behavior was also described as a strain on the relationship between students in foster care and the schools they attended. Foster parents perceived teachers as being ill-equipped to handle their foster children's behaviors, cognitive delays, and traumatic histories. For example, Shannon, a foster mother, stated:

> That special ed [sic] teacher, I'm not impressed with. I find her to be very cold. I find her to be very punitive to him. She's always giving him lunch suspensions. I'm like, 'You can't punish him for things he truly cannot control. If it's something that we've seen that he can control, then maybe there should be a consequence.

Most of the stuff he's dealing with now he truly cannot control; truly.'

Shannon expresses frustration with what she perceives as an unfair and misplaced (mis)attribution of her foster son's behavior as purposeful and calculated, rather than reflecting a difficult early life history, which undermined her confidence and faith in this teacher to be a supportive force in his education.

Some foster parents explained that they took a proactive approach and gave teachers "a heads up" about tips on how to effectively handle their children's disruptive behavior or how to prevent the behavior altogether, before their children were entering the classroom for the first time. For example, foster parents described informing teachers about the language they used at home to discuss consequences and expectations so that the student understands what is and is not appropriate at school. Susan, a foster parent, explained that she spoke with her child's teachers about coping strategies she has taught her child to use at school, "One of the tools is, if you find yourself getting out of control, remove yourself from the situation. Go for a walk, find a quiet space, ask if you can leave." Other foster parents were open with teachers about their child's abuse or neglect history to help the teacher recognize signs of distress that may appear to be stemming from disrespect.

Like foster parents, former foster youth explained that because they felt that their teachers misunderstood their problematic behaviors and interpreted through the lens of disobedience or malice, it was a struggle to form connections with them. Some described feeling that they were categorized as a "problem kid," "bad kid," and even "garbage" because teachers and administrators tried to "put them in a box" based on their foster care status. Others reflected on times when teachers reached out to learn more about their situation. Dennis reported, "They [teachers] saw that I was kind of down and they took me aside in the hallway and asked what's wrong and stuff like that. Cause my life's kind of difficult. It's a weird situation." Thus, youth voiced the importance for teachers to consider that a student in foster care may have an underlying trauma history that impacts their ability to function appropriately at school, rather than taking a perspective that the student is acting purely out of choice or malcontent. What these students need to succeed at school, according to youth, is an approach that is sensitive to their histories.

School Is Not (and Cannot Be) Top Priority

An additional challenge to foster youth's academic success was their difficulty of prioritizing school in general. Foster parents, teachers, and the youth themselves noted that although they had the *desire* to do well in school, their life

circumstances (e.g., need for a stable home and family) prevented them from being able to focus on schoolwork. Anna, a high school psychology teacher, explained:

Education is not the biggest concern for those students. It's their welfare, their safety…if you look at Maslow's Hierarchy, they don't care about anything until they feel loved. Until they have their needs taken care of, until they feel safe and they feel loved. And then, education will become something that they're concerned about.

Foster parents agreed that youth in foster care often struggle with schoolwork, not because of lack of effort, but because they have "bigger fish to fry" (e.g., their history of trauma and separation from their biological families). Madeline, a foster parent, empathically stated, "If you have all of these other things on your mind, how can you be expected to care about your spelling test?" Former foster youth also recognized that their mental health and family stressors negatively impacted their school performance. Angelina explained how her mood and motivation were affected by being removed from her biological family home and placed into foster care: "I knew I wasn't happy. I didn't want to go to school; I didn't want to do anything. It was just that and I wasn't motivated at all. It stopped me from doing the things I wanted to do." Thus, foster youth find it difficult and sometimes impossible to prioritize school when they face other more important obstacles that stem from perceived lack of safety and instability at home.

Challenges in the Foster Parent–School Relationship (Mesosystem)

In addition to exploring the challenges that arise in relationships between foster youth and their schools, it is also important to address the impact of the relationship between foster *parents* and schools on foster youths' academic experiences. Teachers ($n = 19$; 86%) and foster parents ($n = 16$; 89%) described a disconnect (i.e., a lack of mutual understanding, a lack of communication, and a lack of agreement) in the relationship between foster parents and schools as a potentially negative influence on a foster child's school performance. These participants explained that (a) obtaining special education accommodations for foster youth was complicated for foster parents; and (b) school–foster home communication was strained.

Complexity of Accommodations

Most foster parents of children with special needs expressed frustration with the complexity of the special education process, which is sometimes exacerbated for foster parents because the children may have already had a plan in place

before they entered their foster home. For instance, Connie explained:

> When you first become a foster parent, you have no idea. You have no idea…At first, you go in there and you sit in the meetings and you're very meek and you think that the school is doing the best that they can for the kid. You accept whatever they say. You sign the IEP [Individualized Education Plan] and you go on.

She echoed many foster parents' concerns that they are intimidated by the special education process and although they want to do what is best for their children, they put their trust in the school and often do not question their decisions regarding accommodations. Other foster parents, like Francis, took advantage of the opportunity to have a DCF educational advocate (i.e., a representative from DCF with specialization in the education system) accompany her to IEP meetings because, according to her, "…you have to be a lawyer to figure it all out. [Laughs]. I need somebody. I'm not stupid by any means, but this is out of my league." However, schools are not always receptive to foster parents bringing their "team" to meetings, which creates an additional barrier for foster parents. As Francis went on to describe:

> I'll be there [IEP meeting] with the advocate. I'm also bringing two DCF workers. When I told the school, she emailed me back and she said, 'This is not a personal thing for you to invite your friends to come along.' I thought, Oh my gosh. I didn't even bother to argue with her.

Another parent described that when she told the school she was going to be accompanied by her foster child's attorney at the IEP meeting, the school delayed the meeting because they "wanted their attorney there too." These foster parents sometimes perceive the special education process as intimidating, confusing, and frustrating, which affects their child's ability to obtain appropriate services.

Foster Parents: Strained Relationships with Teachers

In addition to the difficulties with formal special education meetings and accommodations, foster parents described strained relationships with teachers as problematic for foster youth's school experiences. Their perspective was that teachers often did not consider them "real" parents who "knew the ins and outs" of their foster children. In turn, this sometimes meant that teachers were not adequately communicating with foster parents about their children's performance in school, according to some foster parents. Further, the perception that teachers did not respect foster parents led to uncomfortable confrontations and disagreements between foster parents and teachers regarding how best to educate the children. Elaine, a foster parent, explained that she went to great lengths to communicate her child's special needs with the school and that his history of trauma was important to consider when managing his behavior. However, on a rough day, she said:

> My kid went into flight, fight, or fright and they didn't know what to do with him… I'm reminding them that my son can never be put in one of those [isolated time out room] because of the trauma that he's been put through, that that will just turn a bad situation worse. That's not going to calm him down. So, this particular day, they put him there. He's in the time out space, he's screaming.

Elaine's experience is one that other foster parents shared; they explained that their suggestions for how teachers can handle their traumatized children in the classroom were unheard and disregarded, even though they felt they were specific about what might trigger their child (e.g., isolation, physical contact), gave schools empirical data, and provided suggestions from medical professionals and therapists. Similar to former foster youth, foster parents voiced that they would like to be treated equally to biological parents with regard to all aspects of their children's educational experiences. That is, foster parents would like schools to provide the same level of respect and communication to them as they do for other parents to ensure that children in care receive the same educational experiences as their peers.

Teachers: Lack of Home–School Partnership

Some teachers, on the other hand, explained that they had also felt unheard and disrespected by foster parents. Some described their efforts to work as a team with foster parents to improve their child's behavior and/or academic performance at school but noted that they were met with uninvested or absent foster parents. For example, some said they rarely "get a call back" from foster parents, though they believe that the child would improve if the foster parents were more involved with the education system. Lisa put it simply, "If the communication isn't there between the foster parents and the school, if that communication breaks down in any way, the kid can end up lost." In addition, Maria, a teacher, expressed that it seemed like attending IEP meetings was not "part of the job description" for foster parents, insomuch as she had never seen a foster parent at a meeting. Other teachers pondered whether people become foster parents for the "extra income," hypothesizing that they do not feel responsible for educating the children in their care.

Some teachers described an almost adversarial relationship with foster parents, which made collaboration with them next-to-impossible. For instance, Nina, a high school teacher, described a foster mother who did not seem to want to work with students who were struggling, and instead

requested that DCF remove them from her home if there were problems at school. Nina explained:

> Every time I talked to the foster parent, she was like, 'She [foster daughter] needs to leave; she needs to go.' She didn't really talk to her. I felt like I was setting the kid up to get the kid kicked out of there…It was like, 'I'll give you a house, but if you need more than that, then you need to go.' She did really well with the high school kids that just needed a house and could take care of themselves. It makes it hard because you don't want to cause a kid being thrown out. She had been in like 16 homes over the few years.

Nina hesitated to call the foster parent to address school issues because she did not want to jeopardize the student's stability at home. Thus, the school–foster home disconnect, according to some teachers in this study, is exacerbated when foster parents do not return school calls, miss important school meetings, and put all of the responsibility of educating foster youth on the teachers, which contributes to the academic barriers faced by students in foster care.

Discussion

This study integrates the perspectives of teachers, foster parents, and foster care alumni to examine the barriers and supports that foster youth encounter in educational settings. Specifically, we examined the barriers and supports at two levels: the relationship between foster youth and their schools (microsystem) and the relationship between foster parents and schools (mesosystem; Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Considering the abundance of prior research showing that foster youth are at higher risk than their peers to have problems in school (e.g., Blome, 1997; Castrechini, 2009; Smithgall et al., 2004; Zetlin et al., 2010), it is important to understand the educational challenges that foster youth face, as well as strategies that may help them overcome these challenges. In addition, the potential for negative long-term outcomes, such as a higher risk for becoming teen parents (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Svoboda, Shaw, Barth, & Bright, 2012), incarcerated (Jonson-Reid, 2000; Roberts, 2012), and homeless (Dworsky, Napolitano, & Courtney, 2013; Fowler, Toro, & Miles, 2009) suggest a need for research and practice changes to enable foster youth to become successful adults.

Barriers and Supports in the Foster Youth–School Relationship

Participants emphasized that the relationship between foster youth and their teachers is pivotal, which supports prior research (Clemens et al., 2017; Dann, 2011; Rios & Rocco,

2013). For example, participants felt that teacher sympathy or pity negatively impacts foster students. Teachers shared their perspective of witnessing other teachers giving passing grades to foster students because of low academic expectations, foster parents described frustration when teachers of their children "floated" them just to graduate, and former foster youth expressed their lack of connection with teachers when they pitied them.

An additional educational barrier noted by all three groups of participants was foster students' difficulty with prioritizing school because of the number of other stressors they experience (e.g., history of abuse, separation from family). This may partially explain why earlier research (Hedin et al., 2011; Hudson, 2013) has demonstrated that foster youth tend to state that they have high hopes for educational success, but ultimately are less likely to succeed at the rates of their peers who are not in foster care. Teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth explained that the lack of security in their family life, including worries about safety, interfered with their ability to focus at school and make a genuine connection to their school.

Although some teachers in this study expressed that they felt that their teaching methods were sensitive to the needs of children in foster care, many participants (teachers included) believed that schools and individual teachers lacked trauma-sensitive approaches to student misbehavior, which hampered foster students' abilities to improve. These participants discussed how foster youth often exhibit disruptive behavior in the classroom, which they believed was, at least in part, linked to their traumatic pasts. They voiced concern about instances when they perceived teachers as approaching the disruption as intentional and then providing unfair or ineffective consequences for the student. Dann (2011) reported similar findings, noting that teachers without proper training may misattribute students' negative behaviors to choice and disobedience, when in reality, the behavior may be unintentional and out of the realm of the students' control.

Barriers and Supports in the Foster Parent–School Relationship

Participants also voiced that the foster home-school connection could be improved. For example, foster parents and teachers noted the difficulty that foster parents often encounter when navigating the complex special education system. Foster parents explained that sometimes, the special education process is intimidating. Goldberg et al. (2012, 2017) similarly reported that parents who adopted children via foster care and parents who adopted older children in general also found the special education process frustrating and confusing. Teachers in the current study acknowledged that they sympathize with foster parents because, at times, it seems that they are "lost" at such meetings.

In addition to the complex special education process creating a barrier to foster youth's educational success, some foster parents expressed that they felt that teachers did not take their suggestions or perspectives seriously. These parents, similar to foster parents who participated in a study conducted by Blythe et al. (2012) mentioned that they felt that schools did not treat them with the same respect as biological parents (Blythe, Jackson, Halcomb, & Wilkes, 2012). They desired recognition by schools as "legitimate" caretakers. Foster parents could be valuable resources for teachers and schools who aim to provide effective consequences and strategies for youth in foster care, rather than detrimental or unhelpful approaches that have been noted by other researchers (Cavanaugh, 2016; Cole et al., 2009; Taymans et al., 2008). Importantly, some teachers in the current study also expressed that they found communication with foster parents challenging because they did not return phone calls or respond to emails; a perspective also shared by teachers in prior research (Blitz & Anderson, 2016).

Implications for Policy & Practice

Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Several of the themes that emerged in the current study reflect participants' belief that there is an urgent need for trauma-sensitive schools. Characteristics of a trauma-sensitive school include: safe, quiet places for students to take breaks; teachers with knowledge of de-escalation techniques; and a school-wide strengths-based approach toward student behavior management (Cole et al., 2009). A first step toward trauma-sensitive schools is to improve the foster student-school relationship. Teachers could approach a foster student's difficult life circumstances more directly (perhaps with a clinical social worker's assistance) and openly discuss the struggles a student may be experiencing in class with them (Blitz & Anderson, 2016). In turn, it would be easier for students to connect to teachers that hold equal expectations paired with empathy, rather than pity. This stronger teacher-student relationship may enhance student motivation, self-esteem, and sense of academic pride (Dann, 2011). Thus, teachers are urged to promote a challenging curriculum for *all* students, regardless of history in foster care (e.g., Blitz & Anderson, 2016; Hines, Merdinger, & Watt, 2005). Foster youth's social workers could advocate for students by connecting with teachers about the importance of holding students to appropriate expectations and recognizing their efforts.

Participants also highlighted the importance of considering a foster child's priorities (e.g., safety, security, basic needs) when seeking to support their educational achievements. School administrators, teachers, and staff should be aware that for many foster youth, school is a "safe haven" to their unpredictable, tumultuous home life (Clemens et al., 2017; Hines et al., 2005). Case workers and clinicians in the school should also take the needs of a student into account when assessing their progress. The following are suggestions for steps that can be taken to maximize the potential that foster youth feel safe at school, given that they often do not feel safe at home: (a) provide consistency by establishing predictable routines; (b) announce changes in schedules and transitions in advance; (c) clearly explain changes in staff; and (d) create a warm, welcoming environment by encouraging all faculty and staff to greet students by name at the beginning and end of the day. These suggestions can and should be implemented at all levels of education, by all adults involved in the school, and can be beneficial for all students (Cavanaugh, 2016; Dann, 2011; Henderson et al., 2010; Hines et al., 2005). Social workers can also educate foster parents during foster parent training courses about the importance of helping youth feel safe and secure at home and its impact on their performance in school.

In addition, rather than label foster care students as "bad," "combative," and "hopeless," a strengths-based approach is recommended because it has the potential to raise a student's level of intrinsic motivation and feelings of academic self-worth (Cavanaugh, 2016; Dann, 2011). Intentional and targeted praise for "even the smallest step of learning" is valuable (Dann, 2011, p. 464). School personnel, foster parents, and social workers should also support foster youth in developing and maintaining positive peer relationships, which are beneficial to their educational experiences. Again, this support should be targeted and intentional: foster youth can be paired with other youth in peer-tutoring partnerships (both as the tutor and the tutee), foster youth can participate in social skills groups (e.g., "lunch bunch") facilitated by clinical social workers in the school, and foster youth should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities of interest to them. If the approach to foster youth shifts from "damage control" to "recognizing potential," teachers may find their work with foster students less stressful, and students may benefit academically and socially (Barratt, 2011; Cavanaugh, 2016; Taymans et al., 2008).

Of note is that this study is unique in that it limited participants to residents of Massachusetts, a state where at least one report and policy agenda on trauma sensitivity for schools is available (i.e. *Helping traumatized children learn: Supportive school environments for children traumatized by family violence*; Cole et al., 2009). Despite its availability, many teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth were unaware that there was such a resource. Given that students in foster care have behavioral, emotional, and mental health needs at a greater rate than their peers who are not in foster care (Zetlin et al., 2010), trauma-sensitive classrooms may positively influence their school experiences, as well as the experiences of the teachers who seek to support them.

Social workers should disseminate resources to teachers and encourage them to follow trauma-sensitive practices.

Foster Home–School Partnerships

Barratt (2011) suggested that inviting a child's therapist to school meetings may be an effective way to improve collaboration between school staff and parents and to help foster parents feel more supported when advocating for additional or different services for their children. An additional strategy may be to include the DCF educational advocate (if one is available) in special education decision making. Social workers should ensure that foster parents are aware of the educational resources available to them. There are resources available such as Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (SEPAC) in schools, as well as the Federation for Children with Special Needs (FCSN) that offers support for families struggling with the special education system (FCSN, 2013).

In sum, the foster home-school partnership can be strengthened if the following obstacles are appropriately addressed: (a) foster parent challenges with the special education system, (b) unequal treatment of foster parents by schools, and (c) lack of foster home-school communication. DCF social workers might have the ability to reduce these barriers by proactively reaching out to teachers, school social workers, and foster parents early in a child's placement to specifically promote the school–home connection and assist in clarifying foster parents' roles in educational decisions.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study had several notable limitations. First, the sample size for each group (teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth) was small and snowball sampling was used, thus some participants may have been more similar to each other than if random sampling was conducted. The group of former foster youth was particularly small, and because all of the young adults were attending post-secondary (or secondary) education, their responses are likely different from former foster youth who did not choose to continue their education beyond high school. Furthermore, all participants graduated (or were on track to graduate) from high school. The voices of former foster youth who dropped out of high school or chose not to attend post-secondary education are absent from this study; future research should explore the school experiences of those foster youth were not as successful educationally as the young adults in this study. It is likely that they would emphasize additional challenges that more educationally successful youth have not encountered. The former foster youth also provided a retrospective account of their educational experiences. Details may not have been as accurate as if they had referred to more recent experiences. In addition, the voices of foster parents and

teachers with significant struggle are not heard in this study. The participants in this study volunteered to talk about their experiences supporting the education of youth in foster care. Their experiences are likely different from foster parents and teachers who chose not to participate. Foster parents and teachers may not want to discuss this topic for a number of reasons (e.g., they do not have time or are overwhelmed; their experiences are too painful to discuss with a researcher). Future work should prioritize the perspectives of foster parents and teachers who have or are currently struggling with supporting foster youth. Possible suggestions to increase the likelihood of their participation include using alternative methods of data collection that might carry less risk or discomfort than a telephone interview, such as a live chat online or interview via text message. These alternatives would also eliminate the requirement of a telephone service plan, which may have been a financial hardship for potential participants.

An additional limitation is the lack of racial and gender diversity in the foster parents and teachers. Although there was a range of racial backgrounds and genders represented in the foster care alumni, foster parents and teachers were mostly white and female. Future work should aim to recruit foster fathers, male teachers, and foster parents and teachers of color to gauge whether race and/or gender has an impact on their experiences supporting foster children in schools. As members of minority groups within the school and social welfare systems, their experiences may be shaped more by prejudice and discrimination than those of the participants in this study.

Finally, this study was limited to teachers, foster parents, and foster youth in Massachusetts. As was mentioned earlier, Massachusetts has a specific initiative set forth by the Massachusetts Advocates for Children (The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative) that aims to improve the school experiences for children with trauma history. Despite many teachers and foster parents in this study being unaware of this initiative or its resources (which were available for at least five years prior to this study's data collection), the experiences of foster students likely differ in states where such initiatives are not in place. Furthermore, foster youth who live in states where schools focus more on trauma sensitivity may have different experiences from students in Massachusetts. Future research should continue to examine the educational experiences of youth in foster care in other states, where policies differ.

Conclusion

Teachers, foster parents, and former foster youth in this study voiced what they perceived to be barriers to educational success as well as effective strategies for supporting the educational needs for youth in foster care. Foster youth

face educational obstacles that other children do not face: they are more likely to have experienced trauma, more likely to switch schools, and are more likely to drop out of high school. Participants offered thoughtful insights into how foster youth can be supported to achieve academic success. Many of the suggestions for improvement are already available (e.g., DCF educational advocates, a guide on how to educate a child with trauma) but are often left unutilized. Other suggestions (e.g., additional support for foster parents navigating special education services, enhancing extracurricular opportunities for students in foster care) appear to have the potential to create a major impact and seem feasible. Federal policies such as the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) have been established to support foster students' educational achievement. Social workers, schools, and foster parents should follow the guidelines put forth by such policies and collaborate to narrow the achievement gap between foster youth and their peers.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Clark University Institutional Review Board and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Research Involving Human and Animal Rights This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors.

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