MISSOURI FOSTER PARENTS:

ADVOCATING FOR THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

OF CHILDREN FROM HARD PLACES

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A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Doctor of Education

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the dissertation entitled

MISSOURI FOSTER PARENTS: ADVOCATING FOR THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN FROM HARD PLACES

presented by Sarah Thornton, a candidate for the degree *Doctor of Education*, and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Dr. Cynthia MacGregor

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Dr. Jon Turner

DEDICATION

My parents, Bobby and Dinah Ensor, always said they didn't want me to have to work as hard as they did to make a living. To them, education is the key to a better life. They proudly attended my commencement ceremonies for my bachelor's and master's degrees. A decade later, they suggested I pursue a doctorate and offered to help. We couldn't have known then that six months into my program, my mom would be diagnosed with Stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. This educational journey will always run parallel in my memory to my mom's cancer, my dad's caretaking, and my sister and I collaborating to help as much as possible. Through all of the sadness and struggle, they have remained my biggest fans.

My husband, Andy Thornton, is the best partner in the universe. During this latest season of life, he held the fort down when I was hanging out in Columbia for class, writing in my office, and sitting with my mom. And let's just say, our "fort" is not easy. Parenting the unique children God has placed in our home has been intensely challenging. Andy is a superhero dad and a saint. Even with the pressures of parenting, working, and caring for parents, he never misses a chance to brag on me. This degree is his, too, because no one is a more passionate advocate than he is.

We love all our children equally, but the levels to which they reciprocate vary greatly. Our youngest two are the only ones who pay enough attention to know I will soon be Dr. Thornton. Dae called me every night when I was in Columbia. His love and laughter make this parenting journey fun. Dae, when I'm done with this, let's plan some adventures! Sis has always been my rock. After the teenage years have passed, we are going to be the best of friends, I'm sure of it. Daughter, I'm proud of you and can't wait to see the powerhouse woman you will become.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Introduction to the Background of the Study

Low educational attainment rates for older youth in foster care are not new, and they are not improving in proportion to other populations. Nationwide, the graduation rate is around 50% for children in foster care during high school, compared to a nationwide average consistently above 80% (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). The postsecondary completion rate is under 10% for children in foster care during high school, compared to a nationwide average above 40% (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

To address this problem, state and federal legislators and private agencies have made policy changes and increased education funding for older youth in foster care. The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 revised Title IV Part E (Foster Care and Adoption Assistance) of the Social Security Act to provide grants to states for independent living programs, and it led to the institution of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program in each state (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.). Foster youth qualify for high levels of financial aid for postsecondary education: Chafee Education and Training Education Voucher (ETV), Pell grants, federal student loans, and state grants like Access Missouri (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.). Youth who choose to remain in care after age 18 receive a living stipend and health insurance until the age of 21 in most states, including Missouri (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.). Older youth in foster care qualify as independent on the FAFSA, which generally means they qualify for the full Pell grant. In 2019-20, full Pell was $6,195 (Federal Student Aid, n.d.), which is enough to pay for tuition and fees for most community colleges and some four-year institutions.

If policy and funding changes have not increased the educational attainment rates to an adequate level, then other factors must be at play. Frequent placement changes across district lines require older youth to transfer to different school settings, which causes knowledge gaps and credit problems (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012). Older youth in foster care are more likely to face cognitive and behavioral challenges, which are more likely to go undiagnosed or untreated because of frequent placement changes (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004). Ineffective collaboration between schools and the child welfare system impedes progress (Loetzerich, 2017). Foster youth may not have the kind of mentoring support they need when they need it (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Vacca, 2008; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004).

A positive relationship exists between educational attainment of older youth in foster care and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Because of their unique set of challenges and background, foster youth need supportive adults to be assertive and skilled allies who act as their educational advocates (Loetzerich, 2017; Silvia, 2007; Weinberg, Oshiro & Shea, 2014). In the context of foster care, educational advocacy includes the standard roles, but it also expands to include negotiating for legislation concerning foster children to be followed, asking for transfer work to be evaluated and applied, and ensuring children are treated equitably regardless of past behaviors or red flags.

Statement of the Problem

Problem of Practice

In Missouri, a number of adults interact with a foster youth's case. A collaborative Family Support Team (FST), which consists of the caseworker, juvenile officer, and guardian ad litem (child's attorney), manages the foster youth's case plan. The caseworker extends an invitation to FST meetings and court dates to legal guardians, foster parents, and other relevant parties (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.c.). The FST meets according to a state-mandated schedule and develops a plan primarily for the child's living situation, which it delivers to the judge (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.c.). During FST meetings, the caseworker or foster parents may deliver behavioral and academic progress reports from the foster youth's school. Approximately one-third of foster children in Missouri are assigned a Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) worker, who may engage in some educational advocacy on the child's behalf (Missouri CASA Association, n.d.). Older foster youth are assigned a Chafee worker, who assists the youth with the transition to adulthood, and may communicate some educational information (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.c.). Neither the CASA worker nor the Chafee worker has daily contact with the foster youth, and rarely is either one present at the youth's school. Although many people are involved in a foster youth's case, no single person is charged with educational advocacy; therefore, accountability for educational advocacy is lacking. Each foster youth could benefit from having a single point of contact who serves as an educational advocate (Kelly, 2000; Loetzerich, 2017; Silvia, 2007; Weinberg, Oshiro & Shea, 2014).

Gap in the Literature

Several studies have examined the reasons behind the low educational attainment rates of foster youth (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012; Loetzerich, 2017). Others have reviewed programs which have successfully increased educational attainment rates of foster youth (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016). The educational experiences of former foster youth have been explored from their perspective (Loetzerich, 2017; Neal, 2017) and the perspective of social workers (Silvia, 2007).

A rich collection of research about parents' educational advocacy behaviors precede this study, including studies which have explored the educational advocacy of parents of children with learning disabilities (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006), autism (Mulick & Butter, 2002) or giftedness (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011); of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011); of African-American mothers making school-choice decisions (Wilson Cooper, 2007); and of bilingual and bicultural families mediating with schools (Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011). Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, and Robertson-Grewal (2011) called for further research applying the dimensions of advocacy to parents of various groups of exceptional learners. Research is needed to extend the dimensions of advocacy to foster parents and to examine the ways in which they parallel the advocacy behaviors of other parents. While a range of studies have discussed foster youths' educational experiences, and several others have examined the educational

advocacy behaviors of parents, foster parents' experiences as educational advocates in the lives of foster youth have not been explored.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore how foster parents are serving as educational advocates in the lives of foster youth, regardless of role clarification or accountability. In-depth interviews will explore the ways in which foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster youth and the ways in which their experiences illuminate additional ways in which foster youth may be supported. This type of educational advocacy comes with myriad challenges unique to foster parents, especially during the first year of a foster placement; this study will also ask foster parents to describe experiences which illustrate those challenges. This study will utilize a phenomenological qualitative design following Seidman's (2013) three-interview process. Participants will include foster parents from the state of Missouri, and the setting will be in the hometowns of the participants. To protect the identities of the participants and the researcher's children, pseudonyms will be used.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster youth?
2. What challenges do foster parents experience as they serve as educational advocates?

Supporting Framework

The supporting framework for this study is the dimensions of parental educational advocacy identified by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011). The research

will explore the ways in which foster parents utilize the dimensions of advocacy to ensure foster youth have the resources they need to succeed in school. Educational advocacy is an approach in the field of special education which speaks to the need for children with special needs to be supported by a knowledgeable education professional whose primary interest is the child's best interest, not the school personnel's or the school's budget (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Educational advocates attend Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings and assist the parents with implementing the plan. This study extends the title *educational advocate* to foster parents because of the parallels between their work mediating between foster youth and schools and that of a special education advocate.

As an outcome of their qualitative study on the advocacy behaviors of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011) identified four dimensions of educational advocacy, which will serve as categories of inquiry for this study: *awareness, seeking information, presenting the case,* and *monitoring*. *Awareness* refers to the ways in which parents notice learning differences in their children. *Seeking information* is the stage in which parents pursue assessments for their children and investigate potential resources to support their children's learning. *Presenting the case* is the dimension whereby parents seek to convince school personnel and other important stakeholders of their children's educational needs. *Monitoring* speaks to the follow-up activities of parents as they proactively ensure their children's educational plans are being followed and needs are being met.

Design of the Study

This study will use qualitative research methods, with qualitative interviews as the primary data collection tool. Qualitative research is well-suited for studying experiences and interpreting their meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and interviews allow the researcher to tell people's stories (Seidman, 2013). The researcher is the primary instrument in qualitative research and is necessarily open and honest about his or her own background and interest in the topic (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative researchers use an emergent design in planning their research process, recognizing that the initial plan may change after data collection begins; therefore, the qualitative researcher must be flexible and responsive (Creswell, 2014).

This study will use a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is effective for studying emotional or intense human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The product of a phenomenological study is a composite description, or *essence,* of the experience for "several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Prior to data collection, the phenomenologist conducts an *epoche,* a time of self-reflection to find biases and assumptions, and then uses *bracketing* to set them aside in order to bring an open mind to the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher is entering this study with biases and assumptions because of her own experiences as a foster mother and as an adoptive mother of four children, who are now adolescents and young adults: Dante, age 14; Aliya, age 16; Jack, age 17; and Jeremy, age 22. To address her biases and assumptions, she is including a positionality statement and will respond to the interview protocol questions before interviewing participants.

Positionality Statement

My husband and I were licensed foster parents for 12 years and plan to continue in the future, once we finish raising our three teenagers, whom we have had since Dante was six months, Aliya was two, and Jack was four years old. During the 12 years, we fostered nine children and adopted four of them, provided respite care for several other foster parents, and assisted with foster parent training. We became friends with dozens of other foster parents and welcomed them to sit on our porch and share their experiences.

Of the nine children who graced our home, three boys came to us individually at sixteen years of age: Maliq, Ben, and Jeremy. Two personal experiences in particular have inspired my interest in parental educational advocacy in foster parents: one involves Maliq, and the other, Jeremy. The first, Maliq, came to us the spring of his junior year after he was expelled from his transitional living program and high school for fighting. The transitional living program said they could not keep him safe because groups of boys were showing up at the site, prepared for a brawl. Maliq's caseworker, Alexis, had been our caseworker for our set of three adopted children, and she asked us to consider inviting this special young man to live with us. She said he was more than his file. Because she had always been brutally honest and extraordinarily good at her job, we trusted her. After an initial meeting with him, we said yes, and he said yes.

Our first obstacle was convincing his high school of origin to see beyond the file. He wanted to return there and graduate. Alexis, foster baby on her hip, met me at the high school with the goal of convincing the principal to give Maliq a real chance. She knew the Missouri statute that protects a foster youth's ability to return to the school of origin, regardless of the attendance area of the foster placement's address, but she hoped

she would not need to use legislation or threats of going over his head to compel the principal to offer Maliq a chance. Although the principal was reluctant and continued to refer to this being a transfer because we did not live in the attendance area, he allowed Maliq to enroll.

The second obstacle was maximizing his credits from three high schools to give him a chance at graduating on time. Thankfully, his guidance counselor, Mary, was a miracle worker, and Maliq was committed to graduating. Through a combination of creative transfer substitutions, credit recovery courses, and summer school, he would finish on time if he completed every class successfully. The third obstacle was Maliq himself. He was a magnet for fights. His signature scowl and inability to back down may have contributed to the chronic near-altercation and occasional actual-altercation problem. Unfortunately, even near-altercations end with out-of-school suspensions in our school system, and the days out caused his grades to plummet. The summer after his junior year, we received a letter from the high school saying he did not fulfill his transfer contract, so he would not be able to attend there his senior year. Alexis met with the superintendent, legislation in hand, and we received a letter of reinstatement a few weeks later.

Maliq managed to make enemies during summer school, and, in the process of trying to scare them in a McDonald's parking lot, wrapped his SUV around an ornamental tree. Even with a totaled vehicle and an injured ego, he finished his summer school classes and began his senior year and the welding program at the local community college. Maliq woke up every day and went to school without prompting. He worked at Wendy's and KFC and spent extra time in the welding bay. His teachers and bosses liked

him. His charm made an impression. Still, during his senior year, he was suspended for returning a girl's punch, for reaching across the secretary's desk for his cell phone, for stealing SweeTARTS out of an unlocked vending machine, and for a verbal altercation with another student. My husband and I continued to show up to discipline meetings at his high school and community college and to open houses and parent-teacher conferences. I stayed in close communication with his counselors and teachers, and my husband with the administration. We came to understand this as a two-pronged strategy.

When Maliq walked out of the tunnel with his cap and gown on, I felt like we were celebrating a battle won together: Maliq, my husband and me, Alexis, his counselors and teachers, and countless others who had advocated for him before us. Was the battle over for Maliq? No, he will always carry his emotional baggage and that signature scowl and inability to back down. But he also carries with him a high school diploma, certification in welding, and confidence and self-determination, the intangible outcomes of success. Nine years later, he has held well-paid welding and hydrographic jobs since the week after he graduated from high school. Sometimes, he is still his own biggest obstacle. And, yet, he is still so much more than his file.

The second educational advocacy experience involved our son, Jeremy, who came to live with us the spring of his junior year already on probation with the juvenile office for stealing. A few months into our placement, his ex-girlfriend's family filed an ex parte protection order against him. Both legal issues required our presence in parenting classes, drug tests, and court dates. Both impacted his school life, because the stealing occurred at school, and his ex-girlfriend attended there. His regular verbal escalation with other students and sometimes staff members impacted his school life even more.

I can vividly recall the day when his vice principal called to tell me he had crossed a line in her office and would be suspended for ten days for disrespect. She proceeded to tell me I might as well make plans to send him to a different school, probably an alternative school, because he would not make it the rest of the year there. This was the fall of his senior year, and he was on-track to graduate if the frequent maximum suspensions did not derail him completely. Her call deflated me, because this young man in our care had verbalized his desire to graduate from his school of origin. I could understand why the vice principal reacted with such an extreme punishment; his temper and snide comments challenged our patience as well, but we knew his background well enough to know why he had developed some less desirable behaviors.

My husband and I took her threat as a challenge. We were present and vocal. We reminded the administration that one outcome of childhood trauma is an intense fight-or-flight response instinct, and Jeremy generally chose "fight." We scheduled meetings with the head principal and assistant principal throughout the year to ask why they gave maximum suspensions for everything and what we could do to see him graduate. Jeremy experienced two ten-day suspensions at the beginning of the year for threatening to fight other students. When the school resource officer aggressively questioned Jeremy after school, my husband intervened by stepping between them and deescalating both parties, likely preventing one more suspension had he felt cornered.

To our son's credit, he graduated with his class, but I have to wonder if the outcome would have been different had he not been living with very assertive foster parents who believe a high school diploma is worth a fight. We adopted Jeremy the

summer following his high school graduation. We are proud to say he is a high school graduate, he can always find a job, and he provides for his daughter.

Our experiences as educational advocates for Maliq and Jeremy sparked my interest in this topic, and my experiences with our other foster and adopted children have further inspired me to explore the ways in which other foster parents serve as educational advocates. The dynamics are unique in a foster home: complete strangers become immediate family members without any foundation of trust or even memories. When the foster youth is a teenager approaching adulthood, the pressure to pave the best possible pathway to the future is heavy. I understand the dynamics and the pressure, but the difficulty of the situation is not an excuse for inaction.

I believe foster parents are in the most logical position to serve as educational advocates and they have the responsibility to do so. However, I acknowledge my belief is not everyone's, and it is not my goal to persuade participants to become educational advocates or to alter their perceptions of their roles. It is my goal to invite them to share their experiences so we might collectively bring light to the advocacy work in which they are tacitly engaging. I anticipate themes of best practices and common struggles will emerge.

Setting

Like public education, foster care is governed by states, so each state's system is different. This study will take place throughout the state of Missouri and will ideally include a sample reflective of the urban, suburban, and rural populations in various regions. Qualitative research emphasizes collecting data in the natural setting of the participants (Creswell, 2014); therefore, the interviews will be conducted in the

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hometowns of participants in a setting of their choice. Virtual interviews using video conferencing will also be an option.

Interview Participants

Creswell (2014) indicated the number of participants is a function of the type of qualitative approach being used; a phenomenological study generally includes three to ten individuals. For this study, interview participants will include eight to 10 veteran foster parents who have had a minimum of a one-year placement of a foster youth. Following approval by the institutional review board at the University of Missouri-Columbia, the next step will be to contact the gatekeepers (Creswell, 2014) at foster care licensing agencies with a proposal describing the study (See Appendix A). Upon their approval, a recruitment email will be sent to the agency's list of active foster parents with a description of the study and an opportunity to participate (See Appendix B). Participants will be selected from various regions in Missouri and by gender, to generate a maximum variation sample. Potential participants will receive the informed consent form (See Appendix C). Should access become problematic, a convenience sample (Creswell, 2014) will be used: the researcher will utilize networking techniques to obtain referrals of participants who are not familiar with her background. Seidman (2013) warned that too much familiarity between researcher and participants can skew the outcomes of a study, so particular care will be taken to identify participants outside the researcher's network.

Data Collection

This study's primary data collection will be a series of individual interviews of approximately eight to 10 participants. Phenomenological interviews focus on reflective

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reconstruction of lived experience and the context surrounding it (Seidman, 2013).

Seidman (2013) encouraged a three-interview process as the most effective way of

drawing out the essence of the reconstructed experience. The first interview, a focused

life history, places the current activity in the context of the whole; the questions ask how

the participant came to be involved in the activity. The second interview, the details of

experience, looks at the concrete details of their current lived experience. The third

interview, reflection on the meaning, looks at emotional connections and sense-making

(Seidman, 2013). The interview protocol used in this study will follow Seidman's model

and will align with the supporting framework (See Appendix D). The three-interview

series will last for approximately three hours, with week-long breaks between

interviews. Other data collection will include a researcher journal kept during the

research project.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is both inductive and deductive; the researcher organizes

small data bits into patterns and themes, then dives back down into the details to find

whether the patterns hold and identify where more support is needed (Creswell, 2014).

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) compared this back-and-forth process to moving between the

forest and the trees. Creswell (2013) compared qualitative analysis to a spiral image in

which the researcher enters the spiral with data and circles through the steps of data

analysis: organizing, reading and memoing, coding, interpreting, and visualizing the data.

Phenomenology is uniquely concerned with the essence of the participant's experience,

and a first step in data analysis is writing out the researcher's own experience of the

phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Only then can the researcher approach data analysis with

an open mind. Therefore, the researcher will respond in written form to the interview

protocol from her experience prior to interviewing participants and will include the

results in the researcher journal. The researcher will be referred to as Participant R.

    Coding. Immediately after each interview, transcription, recording into text with

continuous numbering and making notes about significant details, will take place.

Interviews and participants will be described in the researcher journal. Based on

Seidman's (2013) guidance, coding will not take place until all of the interviews are

completed, in order to avoid impacting the outcomes of the other interviews. Based on

Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step analysis process, the first transcribed

interview will be read using *open coding*, noting any potentially relevant bits of data.

Next, *axial coding* will be used to group the codes into larger categories. Keeping in

mind the categories, the process will be repeated for each transcript. Upon completion,

the codes and categories will be entered into a spreadsheet and sorted in various ways to

review the codes and categories from different angles, until meaningful themes emerge.

The researcher will then write a *textural description* of the participants' experiences with

the phenomenon, describing what happened, and then a *structural description* of how the

phenomenon occurred, describing the setting and context (Creswell, 2013). Finally, the

researcher will combine the textural and structural descriptions into composite

descriptions of the experience, which is the *essence* of the experience (Creswell, 2013).

    Validity strategies. In order to validate the accuracy of the findings in qualitative

research, the researcher employs *validity strategies* (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014;

Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010). This study will implement three of Tracy's

(2010) recommendations for qualitative research: rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility.

Rich rigor ensures the breadth and depth of data collection and analysis is sufficient to support findings (Tracy, 2010). Utilizing a three-interview process (Seidman, 2013) and including eight to 10 participants in a variety of settings will provide a "rich complexity of abundance" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). In the findings, *rich, thick description* (Creswell, 2014) will give the reader a greater sense of the participants' reality.

With *sincerity,* the vulnerable, honest researcher employs *self-reflexivity* and *transparency* throughout the research process (Creswell, 2014; Tracy, 2010). In this study, the researcher will practice self-reflexivity through a *positionality statement*, detailing background and ideological information of the researcher which may shape the study (Creswell, 2013), and by responding to the interview protocol prior to interviewing participants. The researcher will demonstrate transparency by including *negative* or *discrepant information* (Creswell, 2014) which appears to disagree with the patterns, and by noting the limitations of the study.

Credibility refers to a study's believability (Tracy, 2010), and the researcher of this study will employ several practices to increase its credibility. *Member checking* (Creswell, 2014) will occur during and after interviews by summarizing the participants' responses back to them and asking for confirmation, and after the findings have been written by asking participants to review them. The advisor will review the development of findings at various stages of the analytical process to improve the trustworthiness of the study. The dissertation committee and other colleagues will serve a *peer debriefing* (Creswell, 2014) role, which will increase the study's clarity for a broader audience. During data analysis, the researcher will employ *analytical memoing* throughout the coding process, in order to develop an *audit trail* (Kalpokaite &

Radivojevic, 2019). According to Tracy (2010), the most important strategy for increasing credibility is using *thick description* to show the reader the scene so he or she may come to his or her own conclusions. The researcher will thoroughly collect and describe the participants' experiences.

Significance of the Study

The current reality for foster youth is that half will not graduate from high school (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Entering foster care should ensure foster youth have the resources and support system they need to succeed in school. Unfortunately, the outcomes do not reflect that kind of ideal. An overarching goal of this study is to create a stronger emphasis on the importance of educational attainment for foster youth and more accountability for making that happen. This study has the potential to lead to a clearer accountability structure which clarifies the educational roles of foster parents and other members of the foster youth's support system.

Second, this study extends educational advocacy research (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011; Mulick & Butter, 2002; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Wilson Cooper, 2007) to foster parents. Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, and Robertson-Grewal (2011) called for further research applying the dimensions of advocacy to parents of various groups of exceptional learners. This study extends the dimensions of advocacy to foster parents, to examine the ways in which they parallel the advocacy behaviors of other parents. Interviews will explore foster parents' educational advocacy behaviors through the dimensions of advocacy discovered by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton and Hagglund (2011). Findings will describe the experiences

of the foster parents who bridge the educational gap for older youth in foster care, and it will illuminate the need for all foster youth to be supported and advocated for if the educational attainment rate is to increase.

Summary

The educational attainment rates of foster youth are abysmal, and positive changes in policy and funding have not improved the rates to an adequate level. Research shows a positive relationship exists between the educational attainment of older youth in foster care and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Neal, 2017). This study will explore foster parents as supportive adults, specifically, *educational advocates*.

Educational advocacy comes from the field of special education and refers to behaviors of supportive adults who intervene and mediate for a child or someone who cannot advocate for self. This study will expand educational advocacy research (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011; Mulick & Butter, 2002; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Wilson Cooper, 2007) to foster parents. Framing the study will be the four dimensions of advocacy proposed by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011). The framework will inform the interview protocol: items will follow the four dimensions (*awareness, seeking information, presenting the case,* and *monitoring*) to explore how foster parents tacitly advocate for the educational needs of their foster children.

This qualitative study will seek to answer the research questions *How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster children?* and *What challenges do*

foster parents face as they serve as educational advocates? The study will use a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Data collection will include in-depth interviews of eight to ten foster parents. By extending educational advocacy research to foster parents, this study will highlight the need for foster youth to have educational advocates and the ways in which that need is, or is not, being met. This study will provide a research foundation for additional research, with the hope of helping to ensure an educational advocate, foster parent or otherwise, is engaged in advocacy behaviors for every foster child in Missouri.

Section Two:

Practitioner Setting for the Study

Introduction

The setting for this study is the family foster home within the Missouri foster care system. The current system in Missouri is best situated within the context of the history of the U.S. foster care system and a brief organizational and leadership analysis. Therefore, an overview of each follows, in addition to a discussion of how these characteristics impact the practitioner portion of this study.

History of the Organization

Caring for orphaned children is not a new phenomenon; the Old Testament and early church records referred to instances of households taking in children (National Foster Parent Association, n.d.). In the United States, churches and communities intervened in cases of orphaned or unwanted children with no government involvement until the late 1800's, when Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and South Dakota pioneered foster-care systems. During the early 1900's, the federal government began supporting state-administered home studies and supports to birth families (National Foster Parent Association, n.d.).

Today, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) oversees a broad range of programs aimed at "enhanc[ing] and protect[ing] the health and well-being of all Americans" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d., para. 1). Beneath the HHS umbrella, the Office of the Administration for Children and Families administers social services aimed at children, including foster care and adoption, through the Children's Bureau. The Children's Bureau implements the Title IV-E Foster Care Program and the John H. Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood (Administration for Children & Families, n.d.). The Title IV-E Foster Care

Program is authorized by Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, and states may use the

funds for maintenance stipends, program administration, training, recruitment of foster

parents, and data collection costs (Administration for Children & Families, 2012).

In Missouri, foster care and adoption is under the umbrella of the Missouri

Department of Social Services (DSS), whose mission is to "empower Missourians to live

safe, healthy, and productive lives" (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.a., para.

1). Over 6,700 budgeted employees work for DSS, under the purview of the director,

who is appointed by the governor of Missouri. Social services account for 32% of the

State of Missouri's fiscal year 2020 operating budget; of the $29,660,519,984 Missouri

expects to spend in 2020, approximately $9.62 billion will fund DSS (Missouri Budget

Explorer, n.d.). In comparison, Missouri's PreK-12 education budget accounts for 21%

of the 2020 budget, or $6.23 billion (Missouri Budget Explorer, n.d.). In 2017, Missouri

spent $10.9 million on preventative services and $52.4 million on foster care services

(Casey Family Programs, 2019). The remainder of the DSS budget is allocated to its

other programs: Family Support Division, MO Healthnet Division, and Division of Youth

Services (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.b.). Children in state custody and

their affiliated families of origin and foster or adoptive families may interact with, or

receive services from, all four divisions; however, Children's Division is the primary

division responsible for children in state custody, and, at the local level, the county office

oversees the work of foster care.

Federal legislation titled *Foster Care Independence Act of 1999* introduced the

John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program in each state (Missouri Department of

Social Services, n.d.d.); the program's name changed to the John H. Chafee Foster Care

Program for Successful Transition to Adulthood in 2018, following the passage of the *Family First Prevention Act of 2017*, which, among other initiatives, expanded services to older youth (115th Congress, 2017). In Missouri, Children's Division's Older Youth Program oversees Chafee, transitional living services, and independent living arrangements for older youth in foster care (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.). Children who are 14 to 23 years of age are classified as older youth (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.).

A nationwide trend toward privatization of foster care has gained momentum as the child welfare system has faced record numbers due to the drug crises over the last 20 years (Dunnigan, 2018; National Conferences of State Legislatures, 2018). In 1997, the state of Missouri began contracting with a select number of private agencies for case-management and foster-parent licensure (Dunnigan, 2018). In 2005, Missouri became one of eight states following a small-scale privatization model, and the partnership between public and private agencies has grown since then. Private agencies must comply with state regulations and are incentivized to reach performance goals, such as finding permanency solutions (National Conferences of State Legislatures, 2018). Children's Division retains authority for all investigation of child abuse and neglect and removal of children from families of origin (Dunnigan, 2018).

Children's Division and various private agencies facilitate foster parent training and licensing. All Missouri foster parents complete the 30-hour Specialized Training, Assessment, Resources, Support and Skills (STARS) program and in-home assessment consisting of a minimum of four visits (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.f.). They must also comply with all licensing requirements, including First Aid/CPR training,

medication training, fingerprinting, and a checklist of home safety regulations (FosterAdopt Connect, n.d.). Maintaining licensure requires additional training, quarterly visits, and continued compliance (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.f.).

Foster parents' competencies and responsibilities not only include parental duties like feeding, clothing, and ensuring the safety of the children in their home, but also case-related ones. The Children's Division document, *Things You Should Know about Becoming a Foster Parent,* stated:

> There are responsibilities and benefits to becoming a foster parent. The responsibilities include working with the Division, the court and the biological parents to develop permanency plans for the child(ren); work with the school(s) to assure the child's educational needs are being met; provide transportation to appointments (counseling, medical, visits, etc.); provide updates to the Division on how the child(ren) are progressing; and maintain a lifebook for the child(ren). (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.e., para. 3)

Parenting children within the context of an ongoing court case, unknown permanency outcomes, and regular disruptions by families of origin, caseworkers, and meetings, is a complicated form of parenting.

Foster parents become the common voice for the children in their home on a number of teams. In Missouri, the Family Support Team consists of the caseworker, juvenile officer, and guardian ad litem. Parents of origin and foster parents are invited to team meetings and court dates, and their reports become public record (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.c.). While they do allow for progress updates about the child's education, health, normalcy activities, and treatment needs, team meetings and

court dates primarily focus on permanency plans (Missouri Department of Services, 2019a). Foster parents may submit a *Caregiver Court Information Form* as potential evidence in a child's case, and they have the right to speak during court hearings (Missouri Courts, n.d.). Foster parents work with medical and therapeutic professionals to ensure the children's physical, mental, and emotional needs are met. Foster parents work with schools to serve the children's educational needs. The *Missouri Resource Parent Handbook* encourages foster parents to advocate for special education services for children who are not meeting grade-level expectations (Missouri Department of Social Services, 2019b). In addition to the caseworker, juvenile officer, and guardian ad litem, ancillary team members may include a Court-Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA) worker or the child's therapist. In addition to their caseworker, older youth are also served by a Chafee worker, who assesses the youth's readiness for adulthood and refers him or her for services to increase readiness (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.d.).

Organizational Analysis

Organizations function interdependently both internally and externally. Within an organization, people, policies and practices combine to form a complex system (Datnow & Park, 2014). This system interacts with external stakeholders and partners and is impacted by them. Because of organizational complexities, understanding an organization is not a straightforward exercise (Bolman & Deal, 2013), but it is a necessary prerequisite to making an effective recommendation. Bolman and Deal (2013) encouraged leaders to frame and reframe problems and decisions using structural, human resource, political, and symbolic lenses. A brief analysis of the Missouri foster care

system utilizing Bolman and Deal's structural, human resource, and political frames follows.

Structural Analysis

The network of people involved in each case reflects, on one hand, the well-intentioned system which incorporates a whole team of experts on the child's behalf; on the other, the complicated system often fails to accomplish its mission because one of its parts is not doing its job. A recent case in Springfield, Missouri, was delayed by nearly a year because the court reporter failed to turn on the recorder during the two-day hearing for the termination of parental rights (J. Thomas, personal communication, March 15, 2018). The court repeated the entire hearing again several months later once the court and attorneys were available. "The system is broken" is a common theme among foster parents and caseworkers because they see the trauma the system itself causes children in care, families of origin, foster parents, and caseworkers, and it is a common theme among the media and politicians because they read the negative statistics or hear a story about a child abused or neglected while in care (Dupere, 2018).

Structurally, the foster care system is a bureaucracy, which Weber (1968) proposed as the most efficient administrative model. Bureaucracies are hierarchical, where the authority resides at the top of the pyramid, and the days are ordered by standard operating procedures (Manning, 2013). The foster care system is a multi-tiered hierarchy with many layers of middle-line managers coordinating communication and supervision (Mintzberg, 2005). Each individual case in Missouri is governed by federal and state legislation and implemented by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, through the Office of the Administration for Children and Families, through

Children's Bureau, to the State of Missouri's Department of Social Services, through

Children's Division, through the county offices (See Figure 1). A hierarchy requires

vertical coordination, where communication flows up and down the chain-of-command,

and lateral or horizontal coordination, where communication flows from side-to-side

(Mintzberg, 2005; Manning, 2013). Missouri's small-scale privatization of foster care

has increased the need for lateral coordination, to enable private agencies to work

effectively with the public sector.
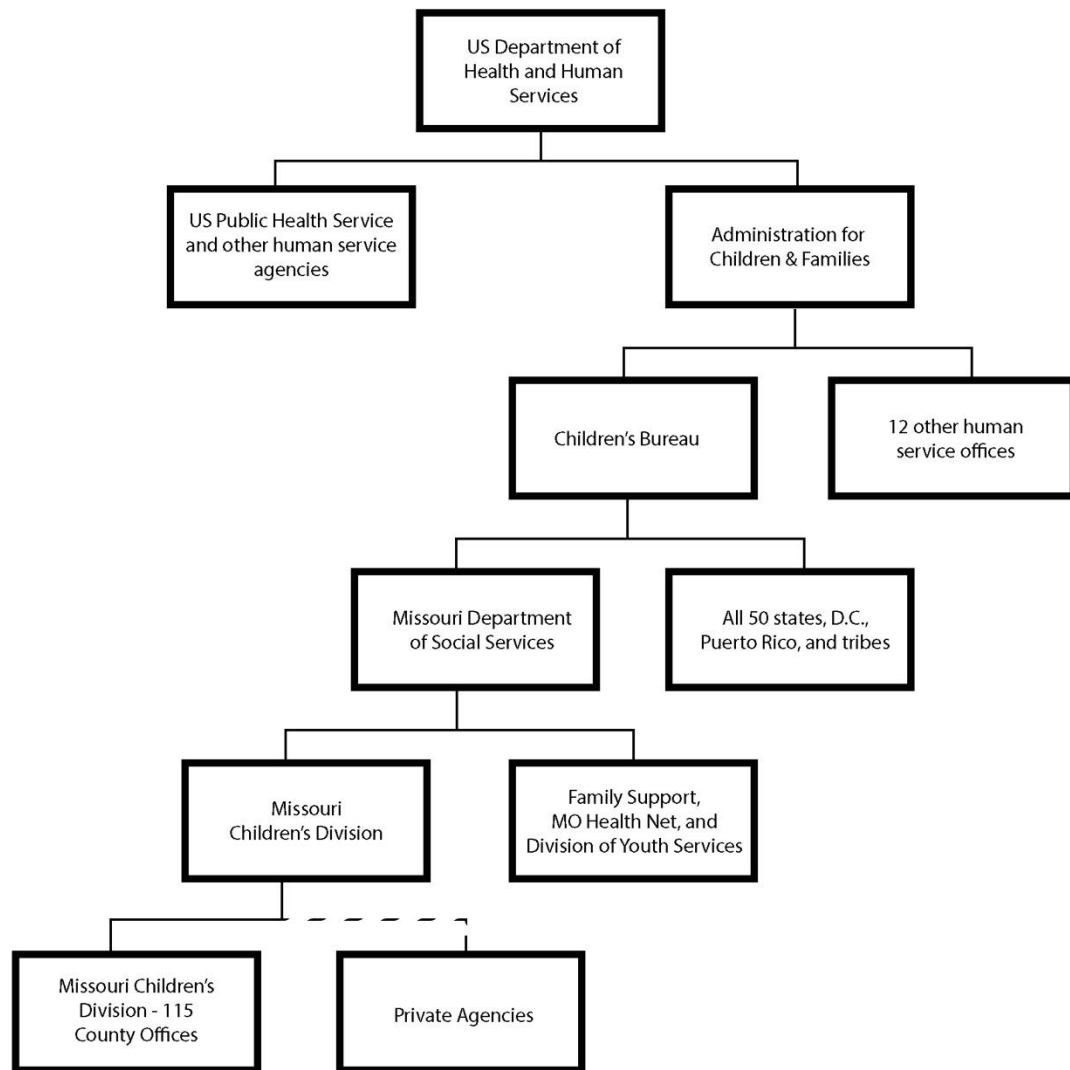
Figure 1. Foster care administration hierarchy, federal to local in Missouri.

Consistency between counties and between agencies is a challenge. Although they are all implementing the same legislation, their interpretation of the laws may vary, based on philosophy, resources, or culture. The presence of private agencies varies by region of the state, and the prominence of an agency may change every time contracts are renegotiated. Additionally, the family judge sets the expectations for the county, so his or her interpretation and personal goals impact every case. Foster parents who have

worked with different counties in Missouri have likely experienced notably different systems at the local level.

Foster parents do not fit perfectly into the hierarchy. Missouri foster parents are licensed by the State of Missouri; their licensing worker ensures compliance and communication. In that sense, foster parents are at the bottom of the licensing hierarchy. However, they may also accept placements from a number of counties and private agencies; as independent contractors, foster parents may decide which placements to accept. Each placement is assigned a separate caseworker who manages the case and ultimately makes placement decisions; in that sense, foster parents report to the caseworker. Additionally, foster parents serve on the child's FST, which ultimately reports to the judge. Foster parents, then, may not understand their place in the organizational structure.

Human Resource Analysis

The common theme of the foster care system is human need: individuals who need support in order to maintain custody of their children, individuals who need a safe place to call home, and individuals who are compelled to respond to the needs of others. Beyond that, finding universal traits is difficult. The foster care system is comprised of a diverse group of individuals with an array of backgrounds, ideologies, motivations, and personalities. Most foster parents' primary motivation is child-centric, but others are self- or society-oriented in their initial reasons for fostering (De Maeyer, 2014). Some caseworkers favor reunification efforts, while others lean toward adoption as the more favorable option. Regardless of personal traits or beliefs, everyone working in the foster care system is united around human need.

The 443,000 children placed in state custody in the U.S. at any given time (Foster Care, n.d.) have a long list of needs the foster care system works to meet. Missouri's 13,000 children in foster care (AdoptUSKids, n.d.) should expect a minimum threshold of fulfilled needs:

- Safety: The licensing home study includes a list of physical requirements for the living spaces of foster homes, including square footage minimums per child, safe sleeping standards, a fire safety plan, and double locks on guns and medication. Foster parents must have a clear background check for licensure and re-licensure (Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children, n.d.).

- Food: Foster children automatically qualify for WIC vouchers and free breakfasts and lunches through public schools.

- Clothing: Foster children receive clothing allowances each year; additionally, non-profit organizations throughout Missouri assist foster children with clothing, shoes, and diapers.

- Medical care: Foster children are policyholders for Missouri Medicaid. They are immediately scheduled for a well visit upon entrance into foster care.

- Education: Foster children generally attend public school or school at a residential facility.

- Family: Missouri prioritizes placement with relatives or friends first and foster families second, with residential facilities and group homes serving as backup for a family environment.

- Normalcy: Noting foster children's need for normalcy, Missouri recently reduced restrictions on babysitters, out-of-state vacations, and social media (Children's Bureau, n.d.)

Meeting the individual needs of all constituents is an overwhelming task for caseworkers and foster parents. The stress and emotional strain of working in child welfare is a significant predictor of turnover; the national turnover rate for foster care caseworkers was approximately 30 percent in 2017 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2015). Foster parents exit the system at a rate of 30 to 50% per year (DeGarmo, 2017). Foster parents note their reasons for quitting as feelings of grief and loss, lack of support, and lack of ownership in the decision-making process (DeGarmo, 2017).

Political Analysis

Even an organization whose primary purpose is ensuring children's needs are met is not immune to politics. A scarcity of resources drives decisions (Bolman & Deal, 2013). To meet the needs of children in care and remain within a balanced state budget, the director of Children's Division and other leadership at the state level must innovate. In addition to implementing the federal legislation, *Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018*, which reduced the number of children living in expensive residential facilities (Family First Prevention Services of Act, 2019), Missouri has taken measures to reduce the number of children in foster care. In 2015, Missouri Children's Division addressed the burgeoning foster care numbers by developing and implementing the Missouri Practice Model, a four-pillared approach to child welfare (Ellis, 2018). The four pillars work together to create a holistic, collaborative model aimed at "keeping families together while supporting sustainable change" (Ellis, 2018, para. 4). The first pillar, the

Five Domains of Well-Being, are social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery, and meaningful access to relevant resources (Ellis, 2018). The second pillar, trauma-informed care, takes into account the family's needs from the perspective of each person's history and provides a safe space and appropriate boundaries (Ellis, 2018). The third pillar, the *Signs of Safety,* a casework model which originated in Australia, addresses the question, "How can the worker build partnerships with parents and children in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse and still deal rigorously with the maltreatment issues?" (Signs of Safety, n.d., para. 2). The fourth and final pillar is The Casey E. Foundation's Team Decision Making (TDM) model, a practice method which moves the decision-making from a single caseworker to an entire team of participants (The Casey E. Foundation, 2018). Two years after Children's Division implemented the new model, then-director Tim Decker noted the 6-7% growth rate per year of children in care had slowed to 1.5% (Ellis, 2018).

While the Missouri Practice Model drives the investigation and intervention pieces of child welfare in Missouri, once a child enters care, the ultimate decision about child custody rests in Family Court (16th Circuit Court, n.d.). The Juvenile Office serves as the prosecuting attorney in child custody cases, providing evidence of abuse and neglect, criminal behavior, and lack of participation in the safety plan; but the Family Court judge is the decision-maker. Within legislated windows of time, judges have the power to move a case toward adoption or reunification (16th Circuit Court, n.d.).

Leadership Analysis

Leadership is defined as "a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (Northouse, 2016, p. 6). Leaders guide followers

through change, while managers organize and plan for complexities (Kotter, 2011).

Good leaders, then, effectively guide followers through change, keeping and distributing

hope of better days ahead until the better days arrive (Preskill & Brookfield,

2009). Good leaders set direction, align people by communicating the direction with

them, and motivate and inspire them to achieve the direction (Kotter, 2011). People

should always be a leader's first priority (Kotter, 2011).

Navigating the disparity between the scarcity of resources and the vastness of

human need inherent to the foster care system requires capable leadership which brings

people and resources together. In Missouri, this challenge is too great for a single leader,

and the structural complexity caused by the small-scale privatization model calls for a

team leadership approach. Team leadership also fits the overall goals of foster care in

Missouri. Two of the Missouri Practice Model pillars focus on teamwork: the *Signs of*

Safety casework model encourages caseworkers to develop partnerships with families of

origin (Signs of Safety, n.d.), and Team Decision Making (TDM), a practice method

which moves the decision-making from a single caseworker to an entire team of

participants (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018).

Teamwork is a collective, lateral decision-making structure; therefore, team

leaders share leadership by shifting power to team members (Northouse, 2016). Team

members step forward and take the lead when their influence is needed and step back

when another member's is more appropriate to the situation (Northouse, 2016). When

teams are healthy, their outcomes are more positive than are those from organizations

using an individualized decision-making approach (Levi, 2015). The high stakes of

foster care require organizational leaders to take seriously their leadership approach and work toward effective teamwork at all levels.

Implications for Research in the Practitioner Setting

Knowing the challenges of foster parents and the foster care system on the whole, any strides toward more positive educational outcomes for children in care will require empathy and persistence. Educational attainment is one of many important goals and may appear to be less urgent when other more immediate concerns take precedence. Additionally, high turnover rates among caseworkers and foster parents create a need for frequent training opportunities to engage new participants.

If the structure of the foster care system in Missouri were a simple hierarchy, information could simply be distributed at the director level of Children's Division and disseminated down through the licensing division to foster parents. Because private agencies also license and train foster parents, and because Children's Division in each county functions differently, lateral coordination is necessary to ensure all Missouri foster parents receive the same information. The team approach to foster care in Missouri discourages top-down directives, encouraging instead collaboration and problem-solving at the local level. Therefore, a natural starting point for disseminating the findings and recommendations of this study will be to meet with a team of agency leaders at the county level to determine how they envision this might be shared with a broader audience.

Section 3:

Scholarly Review for the Study

In the U.S., educational attainment is highly valued, and the educational attainment rates are improving each year, with the exception of youth in foster care. The high school graduation rate of foster youth is abysmal, estimated at over thirty-percent lower than non-foster youth (National Working Group for Foster Care and Education, 2014). Research indicates that interventions are effective at increasing the high school graduation rates among foster youth. For instance, there is a positive relationship between foster youths' educational attainment and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Neal, 2017). Supportive adults are referred to as *educational advocates* when they take on a more active role, especially when the child has learning differences (Morin, n.d.). Although many people are involved in a foster youth's case, no single person is charged with educational advocacy; therefore, accountability for educational advocacy is lacking. Each foster youth should have at least one supportive adult who serves as an educational advocate (Silvia, 2007; Weinberg, Oshiro & Shea, 2014; Loetzerich, 2017).

The purpose of this study is to explore how foster parents are serving as educational advocates in the lives of foster youth. In-depth interviews will explore the ways in which foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster youth and the ways in which their experiences illuminate additional ways in which foster youth may be supported. This type of educational advocacy comes with myriad challenges unique to foster parents; this study will also ask foster parents to describe experiences which illustrate those challenges.

This study will utilize a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. The primary form of data collection will be eight to 10 in-depth individual

interviews. Participants will include foster parents from the state of Missouri. The ideal

setting will be in the hometowns of the participants; video conference will also be an

option. The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster youth?

2. What challenges do foster parents experience as they serve as educational

   advocates?

The following sections provide a review of literature pertaining to this study. The

importance of educational attainment and the statistics reflecting a serious gap between

foster youth and non-foster youth demonstrate the tension between an ideal and the

current reality. Knowing the chasm exists leads to a review of what causes the

discrepancy: the barriers to educational attainment. Once those have been identified, a

look at effective interventions and characteristics of youth who have overcome barriers to

educational attainment follows. Two characteristics in particular, supportive adults

(Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Neal, 2017) and

a trauma-informed approach (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Crosby, Day, Baroni, & Somers,

2019), stand out as vitally necessary for educational attainment. In this case, supportive

adults who take on the role of educational advocate positively impact educational

attainment (Morin, n.d.). The final section of the review of literature describes the

supporting framework, Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund's (2011) dimensions of

advocacy, which provides a model for educational advocacy for foster parents. An

exploration of educational advocacy deepens the parallels to foster parents who

assertively partner with schools and academic resources for the youth in their care, and

who face challenges along the way.

Educational Attainment

In the U.S., the importance of educational attainment to quality of life is inarguable. Educational attainment has been established as a predictor of income; on average, as educational attainment rises, earnings increase and unemployment decreases (Vilorio, 2016). In Missouri, the median income of households headed by someone without a high school diploma or GED is around $20,000. Those with a high school diploma or GED but no college have a median income around $30,000. Completion of a bachelor's degree or higher increases the median household income to $45,000-$55,000 (Missouri Census Data Center, 2018). Education has a strong impact on health, regardless of intelligence (Hahn & Truman, 2015). The content of education is more impactful on health than the diploma or degree title: "A person is unhealthy if he or she lacks basic knowledge, the ability to reason, emotional capacities of self-awareness and emotional regulation, and skills of social interaction" (Hahn & Truman, 2015, pp. 659-660). It follows that educational attainment is associated with life expectancy. Adults in the U.S. who are highly educated have a lower yearly mortality rate than less-educated people (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). In addition to the positive links between educational attainment and socioeconomic attainment, social ties, and health behaviors, the relationship between formal education and mortality may also be explained by cognitive functioning developed through formal learning (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). The ability to make thoughtful decisions in complex situations leads to a longer, healthier life.

Gaps in educational attainment are an equity issue when the gap is caused by an obstacle to educational access. Not only is the inaccessibility of educational pursuits

problematic, but the inaccessibility to the benefits of educational attainment also threatens to maintain the economic status quo for families and society as a whole. In the United States, a 21% gap exists between the proportion of whites and the proportion of underrepresented minorities who have completed an associate's degree or higher (Kelly & Torres Lugo, 2017). In 2014, an 18.2% gap existed between people with and without a disability completing a bachelor's degree, and a 10% gap existed for high school completion (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Such wide gaps in a public school system at the K-12 and college levels indicate concerns about equity, and the gap between foster and non-foster youths' educational attainment is even more severe.

Foster youth graduate high school and attend postsecondary school at a significantly lower rate than the national average. In 2014, the nationwide high school graduation rate was around 50% for children in foster care during high school, compared to a nationwide average consistently above 80% (National Working Group for Foster Care and Education, 2014). The postsecondary completion rate was under 10% for children in foster care during high school, compared to a nationwide average above 40% (National Working Group for Foster Care and Education, 2014). A 2013 study of foster youth in California found that foster youth complete high school, enroll in community college, and persist to a second year of community college at a rate significantly lower than the general population and lower than other disadvantaged students (Frerer, Sosenko, & Henke, 2013).

In 2015, fourteen years after Congress passed the *No Child Left Behind Act*, they passed the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, which added foster children as a subgroup for which states would be required to report graduation rates. This was the first time foster

children were recognized in federal education law (Bauer & Thomas, 2019), so the potential for more accurate data regarding the educational attainment rates of foster youth is significant. As of 2019, the federal government has yet to publish the reporting results. However, some individual states have made their findings public. In 2017, Oregon's graduation rate for foster youth was 35%, compared to 77% for their general population (Bauer & Thomas, 2019). In 2019, Kansas graduated 39% of their foster youth (Bauer & Thomas, 2019).

Some states are prioritizing improvement of educational attainment of foster youth. Of particular note are the states of California and Indiana. California has been experimenting with various interventions since the early 2000's. One effective intervention is the Education Liaison model, which employs an educational specialist reporting to the school district and the child welfare agency, and a law agency, which enforces legislation protecting foster children's educational rights (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). In response to the *Every Student Succeeds Act*, the State of Indiana passed *House Enrolled Act 1314-2018*, legislation requiring a detailed report card of educational outcomes for foster and homeless youth. Their findings for the year 2017-18 indicated a 64% graduation rate for foster youth, compared to an 88% graduation rate for the general population (Indiana State Board of Education, 2019). Additionally, the report identified a significantly higher rate of suspensions for foster youth, 21% for foster youth compared to 8.9% of all students (Indiana State Board of Education, 2019). In addition to the outcomes report, a remediation plan is required by *House Enrolled Act 1314-2018*. The Indiana Department of Education submitted their first remediation plan in July 2019. They called the report a starting place, and declared, "Indiana is committed to bridging

the gaps in educational performance for students in foster care, as they compare to those not involved in the foster care system" (Indiana Department of Education, 2019, p. 6). The report outlined goals, potential stakeholders, and a timeline for discovery (Indiana Department of Education, 2019, p. 6). Constituents criticized the remediation plan as lacking intentionality, robustness, and action items (Stringer, 2019); still, Indiana's legislation and efforts stand out as well above the minimum threshold for compliance.

In summary, the financial and health benefits of educational attainment in the U.S. are well-documented. The percentage of foster youth being left behind the national average of high school and postsecondary completion speaks to their lack of access not only to education itself, but also to its inherent benefits. The extent to which this deficit exists is becoming more understood as states implement the reporting mandates of federal legislation, the *Every Student Succeeds Act*. As states and the federal government move toward more systematic data collection and reporting of the educational attainment rates of foster youth, they will become more accountable to join the conversation about the barriers to educational attainment for foster youth.

Barriers to Educational Attainment

Evidence suggests a student's educational attainment is correlated with socioeconomic status (Eagle, 1989), parental educational involvement (Benner, Boyle, & Sadler, 2016), race (Goldsmith, 2009), and English language proficiency (Demie, 2017). When access to educational attainment is blocked by demographic characteristics or other factors outside the student's control, the public school system and other concerned entities work to identify barriers and offer interventions to counter the barriers. The first step is to identify the barriers to educational attainment.

Several studies have examined the reasons behind the low educational attainment rates of foster youth (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012; Loetzerich, 2017). Dworsky & Perez (2010) identified six barriers to former foster youths' attainment of a college degree in their review of literature: lack of encouragement to pursue higher education, under-preparation for college-level work, lack of financial or emotional support, lack of awareness of financial resources available to them, mental and behavioral health problems, and student affairs personnel not being equipped to support former foster youth.

Other studies have revealed barriers related to unmet special education needs among foster youth. Foster youth are more likely to face cognitive and behavioral challenges which have gone undiagnosed or untreated because of frequent placement changes (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004) or a lack of persistent parental advocacy (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). They may have been inaccurately diagnosed in order to qualify them for extra services (Zetlin, 2006). Approximately one-third to one-half of youth in foster care receive special education services, compared to 10% of the general population (Zeitlin, 2006). Those who are diagnosed with a disability experience less success and receive lesser quality services than those outside of foster care (Lightfoot, 2014), or frequently experience a delay in receiving services (Kelly, 2000). Placement changes and unresponsive special education policies create individual education plan (IEP) challenges, which often result in inadvertent IEP violations or delays (Zetlin, 2006).

The school experiences of foster youth may serve as a barrier to educational attainment. Frequent placement changes across district lines require foster youth to

transfer to different school settings, which causes knowledge gaps, record retrieval delays, and credit problems (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004). Youth who live in foster care at the age of 18 have experienced an average of nine placements (Kelly, 2000). It is estimated that a foster youth loses four to six months of academic progress as a result of a placement change (Calvin, 2001). Ineffective collaboration between schools and the child welfare system leaves foster youth vulnerable to unmet needs (Loetzerich, 2017). When they are tainted by negative stigmas about foster youth, teacher attitudes can impede academic progress (Powers & Stotland, 2002).

The emotional outcomes of living in the foster care system may impede educational attainment. Emotional factors like disempowerment, self-defeating attitudes, and anger thwart the learning process (Morton, 2015a). Foster youth have limited opportunities to practice self-determination, so their confidence and assertiveness are often lacking; the restrictions on freedom are even higher for foster youth living in residential facilities (Powers, et al., 2018). Separation from families of origin and, often, multiple disruptions of placement in the foster care system cause various levels of attachment issues and disorders (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Inadequate attachments impair neurological functioning, thereby limiting cognitive development (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

More than ever, the effects of trauma are being understood as profoundly impactful. Children and youth in foster care have undoubtedly experienced significant trauma before and during their interaction with the foster care system. Foster youth are more likely to have experienced maltreatment during childhood or later, and

maltreatment negatively impacts educational attainment rates (Cage, 2018; Morton, 2015b). Foster youth are more likely to have experienced inadequate prenatal care or neglect during early childhood, and are therefore more likely to have learning or emotional regulation problems (Young, Gardner, & Dennis, 1998). Experiencing trauma during childhood or adolescence results in behaviors ranging from "aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention-seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious, and over-compliant behaviors" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004, p. 422), which lead to discipline issues. Around 7% of the general population has been suspended or expelled; among foster youth, that number is approximately 24% (Scherr, 2007). Foster youth are three times more likely than the average to receive disciplinary actions, including referrals, suspension, and expulsion (Scherr, 2007). Recurring discipline problems mean time out of the classroom, so existing gaps in knowledge and skills are exacerbated and become insurmountable (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004).

The barriers to educational attainment for foster youth are significant: cognitive and behavioral challenges, difficulty accessing appropriate special education services, negative school experiences, emotional outcomes of living in foster care, and the effects of trauma. Research supports the idea that foster youth are uniquely vulnerable students who need people, from policymakers to principals to foster parents, who proactively pursue better educational outcomes on their behalf. The survey of barriers foster youth face on their journey to attaining a high school diploma illuminates the need for ongoing, intentional, effective interventions.

Interventions which Increase Educational Attainment Rates

Overall, the educational attainment rates in the U.S. are rising. Between 2011 and 2017, the high school graduation rate rose from 79% to 84.6% (Barnum, 2019). The high school status completion rate for Hispanics, ages 18 to 24, rose from 64% to 89% (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The U.S. Department of Education reported significant increases in high school completion for 18 to 24 year olds and post-secondary participation among Black, Hispanic, and White subgroups between 2010 and 2016 (2019). The improvement in the black-white achievement gap is not consistent across geographical regions, indicating that the achievement gap is truly an *opportunity gap* where economic inequality, racial inequality, and household adult education attainment most significantly impact attainment rates (Hung, Smith, Voss, Franklin, Gu, & Bounsanga, 2020). In the same way, foster youth experience an opportunity gap; therefore, interventions which consider systemic factors are likely to have the most impact.

Kelly and Torres Lugo (2017) claimed addressing attainment gaps begins with making the problem known and effecting change using practical solutions at the state and institutional levels. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* and subsequent state legislation are working to make the problem known. Practical solutions at the state and institutional levels effect change at varying levels. In California, the Foster Youth Services Program has been an effective collaboration between school districts, child welfare, and probation to provide advocacy, tutoring, and information exchange; since its single-county pilot in 1973, the program has expanded to serve over 30 California counties (Kelly, 2000). In

nearly every state, Court-Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) represent children's interests, including educational services to some extent (CASA, n.d.; Kelly, 2000).

Several studies have reviewed factors which address barriers and increase educational attainment rates of foster youth. A positive relationship exists between a longer duration in foster care, especially during the transition into young adulthood, and educational attainment rates, which contradicts policies prioritizing permanency, preferably reunification with birth parents, over aging out (Font, Berger, Cancian, & Noyes, 2018). This phenomenon may in part be due to the funding foster youth receive, which those who reunify with birth parents do not (Font, Berger, Cancian, & Noyes, 2018); youth who choose to remain in care after age 18 receive a living stipend and health insurance until the age of 21 in most states, including Missouri (Missouri Department of Social Services, n.d.). Reducing placement changes and maintaining enrollment at the youth's original school (Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012) and improving collaboration between schools and the child welfare system (Loetzerich, 2017) improve educational outcomes. Former foster youth speak about the importance of messaging; when adults regularly expect them to accomplish something, they are more likely to accomplish it (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017). Programs in university student affairs divisions providing support to former foster youth improve college completion outcomes (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016). Two characteristics recur often throughout the literature about interventions for foster youth: a trauma-informed approach to education and supportive adults.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Because of the complex trauma inherent to the background of the foster child, any interventions must consider and respond to the effects of the trauma. Studies using the Center for Disease Control's *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ACE) instruments have explored the health impacts of childhood trauma, linking experiences like direct and indirect abuse, divorce, and disruption to disease, disability, social problems, and early death (CDC, n.d.). The ACE score for foster youth is generally high, and the adverse experiences are often profound: complex trauma, extreme or prolonged trauma which seems inescapable, results in more immediate issues with attachment, regulation, cognition, and self-concept (Cloitre, M., Miranda, R., Stovall-McClough, K. C., & Han, H., 2005). A majority of foster youth experienced complex trauma prior to their entrance into foster care (Steenbakkers, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2019). Additionally, foster youth perceive the loss associated with disruption from their families of origin as significantly traumatic (Steenbakkers, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2019). Approximately 25% of foster youth are at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder; the non-foster youth risk is around 7% (Pecora et al., 2005; Vacca, 2008).

Those serving youth who have experienced trauma are increasingly utilizing a trauma-informed approach to navigate the complex cognitive and emotional challenges caused by toxic stress (Stevens, 2012). A trauma-informed approach integrates concepts from traumatology, attachment theory, neurobiology, and development (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Trauma-sensitive interventions such as attachment-focused behavioral strategies and sensory integration techniques lead to a decreased level of trauma symptoms and improved socioemotional and relational skills (Crosby, Day, Baroni, &

Somers, 2019). A trauma-informed approach to education sets the most conducive environment for foster youth to learn (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Educators, psychologists, and behavioral experts have developed a number of attachment-informed models to propagate replication of effective practice. Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) is one such model.

Trust-Based Relational Intervention. Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) is a trauma-informed approach borne out of Texas Christian University's summer day-camp program for behaviorally at-risk adopted children (Purvis, Cross, & Pennings, 2009). The approach has been applied and has resulted in positive behavioral outcomes in a variety of settings, including foster and adoptive homes (Purvis, Cross, & Pennings, 2009; Howard, Parris, Nielsen, Lusk, Bush, Purvis, & Cross, 2014), residential treatment centers (Purvis, Cross, Jones, & Buff, 2012; Purvis, McKenzie, Becker Razuri, Cross, & Buckwalter, 2014), and schools (Parris, Dozier, Purvis, Whitney, Grisham, & Cross, 2014).

The TBRI® model emphasizes caregiver behaviors in three areas: Empowering Principles, Connecting Principles, and Correcting Principles (Purvis, Cross, & Pennings, 2009). Empowering Principles focus on scaffolding support for children whose self-regulatory capacities have been disrupted by relational trauma. Empowering Principles address the ecological and physiological needs of children: scaffolding supports include intentional transitions between activities; an emphasis on structure, routines, and rituals; and healthy snacks and opportunities for play. Connecting Principles focus on mindful engagement, which includes engagement principles like eye contact, warm and considerate tone, healthy touch, behavioral matching, and playful interaction; and

mindful awareness, which includes careful observation of children's behaviors as well as self-awareness on the part of the adult. Effectively implementing the Empowering and Connecting Principles lays the groundwork for Correcting Principles. When a child's ecological and physiological needs are met, and he or she is connected to the caregiver, behavioral change is more likely. Correcting Principles emphasize a return to regulation and improved decision-making and communication ability. The caregiver can prevent escalated behaviors by engaging with the child playfully and talking through the child's challenges using behavioral scripts, and can maintain connection during correction by practicing time-ins rather than time-outs.

The TBRI® model and other trauma-informed models are gaining momentum as foster parents and other caregivers, teachers, and counselors implement them and find their principles effective at addressing the needs of children from hard places and, over time, at making forward progress behaviorally and emotionally. The outcomes of trauma, including sensory, attachment, and trust issues, are a barrier to educational attainment. Utilizing a trauma-informed approach reduces the impact of the traumatic experiences on a foster youth's educational attainment by setting the most conducive environment for foster youth to learn (Berardi & Morton, 2017).

Supportive Adults

Several studies point to the importance of a supportive adult, advocate, mentor, liaison, or volunteer "buddy" to help the foster youth navigate the educational system or collaborate with the school system (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Vacca, 2008; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). A positive

relationship exists between educational attainment of foster youth and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Because of their unique set of challenges and background, foster youth need supportive adults to be assertive and skilled allies who act as their educational advocates (Loetzerich, 2017; Silvia, 2007; Weinberg, Oshiro & Shea, 2014). They also benefit from mentors who support their self-determination and agency (Powers et al., 2018).

Research indicates foster parents can positively impact foster youths' educational attainment. In their qualitative study of high-achieving former foster youth, Skilbred, Iversen and Moldestad (2017) investigated what foster parents did right and found three major patterns: foster parents treated foster youth as if they were their biological children, which helped them feel a sense of belonging; foster parents taught and demonstrated values like work ethic; and foster parents established routines and structures, which indicated care and expectations to their foster youth. DeGarmo (2015) outlined a clear list of the ways foster parents must advocate for their foster youth, and charged foster parents with the importance of this role:

> In order for a child in foster care to succeed in school, his or her foster parents
> must be leading the charge and blazing a path as [an] advocate, fighting for the
> child's every chance. In truth, it is likely that the foster student will have no other
> person fighting for them, as the social worker's workload is an overwhelming
> one, and their teachers may be too busy to reach out with information, or may not
> have the necessary information about the child that they need in order to meet

their needs. Therefore, it is up to the foster parent to be proactive in the child's

life at school. (p. 99)

Advocating for the foster youth at school, maintaining expectations and supports at home,

and treating the foster youth like their biological child sets a solid foundation for success.

Interventions recommended in studies about the educational attainment of foster

youth include collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies (Kelly, 2000;

Loetzerich, 2017), programs focusing on foster youth success (Kelly, 2000; Dworsky &

Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016), financial resources for

foster youth (Font, Berger, Cancian, & Noyes, 2018), application of a trauma-informed

approach (Berardi & Morton, 2017), and supportive adults (Clemens, Helm, Myers,

Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer,

Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014).

Supportive adults who take on the role of educational advocate can impact the

educational attainment of foster youth, thereby changing the course of the youth's future

(Skilbred, Iversen & Moldestad, 2017). Foster parents are uniquely situated to fulfill the

role of educational advocate (DeGarmo, 2015). The supporting framework for this study,

the dimensions of parental educational advocacy (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, &

Hagglund, 2011), demonstrates the stages in which parents become educational advocates

and take action as their understanding of their children's needs evolves.

Supporting Framework

The supporting framework for this study will be the dimensions of parental

educational advocacy identified by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011)

during their study of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol syndrome. The

research will explore the ways in which foster parents utilize the dimensions of parental educational advocacy to advocate for foster youth. Additionally, it will identify challenges foster parents experience during their application of the dimensions of advocacy.

Educational advocacy is an approach in the field of special education which speaks to the need for children with special needs to be supported by a knowledgeable education professional whose primary interest is the child's best interest, not the school personnel's or the school's budget (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Educational advocates attend individualized education plan meetings and assist the parents with implementing the plan. This study extends the title *educational advocate* to foster parents because of the parallels between their work mediating between foster youth and schools and that of a special education advocate.

A rich collection of research about parents' educational advocacy behaviors precede this study, including studies which have explored the educational advocacy of parents of children with learning disabilities (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006), autism (Mulick & Butter, 2002) and giftedness (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011); of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011); of African-American mothers making school-choice decisions (Wilson Cooper, 2007); and of bilingual and bicultural families mediating with schools (Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011).

This study extends educational advocacy research (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011;

Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011; Mulick & Butter, 2002; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Wilson Cooper, 2007) to foster parents. Interviews will explore foster parents' educational advocacy behaviors through the dimensions of advocacy discovered by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton and Hagglund (2011). Findings will tell the stories of the foster parents who bridge the educational gap for foster youth, and it will illuminate the need for all foster youth to be supported and advocated for if the educational attainment rate is to increase.

As an outcome of their qualitative study on the advocacy behaviors of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011) identified four dimensions of educational advocacy, which will serve as categories of inquiry for this study: *awareness, seeking information, presenting the case,* and *monitoring*. The dimensions are not always sequential; in fact, parents may be performing tasks from all four dimensions simultaneously (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011).

Awareness refers to the ways in which parents come to notice learning differences in their children. Parents become aware of differences through a variety of data points: observations, parent-teacher conferences, report cards, standardized testing results, one-on-one study sessions with their children, and referrals for special services. My husband and I often recall the first-grade parent-teacher conference when we noticed Jack had earned exactly two stickers on the first poster board, one other boy had three, and the other 23 children in his class had stickers all the way across to a second poster board, approximately 60 stickers compared to Jack's two. Although we knew he had behavioral

challenges, we had not until that moment fully realized how that might impact his success in the classroom.

Seeking information is the stage in which parents pursue assessments for their children and investigate potential resources to support their children's learning. Parents may begin the long process of pursuing an accurate diagnosis, or of identifying experts, or of researching their own methods for addressing learning needs. In Jack's situation, we sought out a child psychologist, Dr. Jim, who helped us with a psychological evaluation, medication recommendations, and, eventually, diagnoses. Jack began medication for his attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in second grade, and his behavior immediately improved, allowing him to stay in the regular classroom more and the in-school-suspension classroom less. His intelligent mind blossomed for the next three years, and he even received awards for art, language arts, and mental math.

Presenting the case is the dimension whereby parents seek to convince school personnel and other important stakeholders of their children's educational needs. My husband presented Jeremy's case to his assistant principal by providing a brief overview of a trauma-informed approach and asking him to call us before confronting Jeremy about discipline issues, especially if a resource officer was involved. After that meeting, the assistant principal honored our request, and Jeremy's frequent out-of-school suspensions lessened to shorter punishments because Jeremy was not triggered during the disciplinary meetings. His grades improved as he was in the regular classroom more and the alternative school less. This dimension requires persistence on the part of parents, because many schools are overburdened by discipline referrals and requests for special-education services. Foster and adoptive parents may access social services provided by

the county or state; however, the timeline from inquiry to implementation may be longer than desired, and the process may require a level of commitment marked by thick packets of paperwork and hours of appointments, which lead to referrals to more appointments.

The fourth dimension, *monitoring*, speaks to the follow-up activities of parents as they proactively ensure their children's educational plans are being followed and needs are being met. Educational plans may be formal Individual Education Plans (IEP) or 504 Plans, or informal agreements between parents and school personnel. During Jack's sixth-grade year, we received a call from the truancy officer near the end of the first semester. Jack had accumulated over 30 tardy notices. We had dropped him off at the middle school on time every day all year. We collectively discovered he had been hiding in the halls until the bell rang and heading to the office for breakfast, because he knew they were required to feed him breakfast, so he would miss part of his science class. My husband and the assistant principal developed a plan to counter Jack's manipulative actions: my husband texted the principal each morning when he dropped Jack off, and the assistant principal walked Jack to his classroom. Our youngest son, Dante, consistently scored poorly on reading tests, which were all computerized. During his third-grade year, we transferred him to a school with a lower student-to-teacher ratio and fewer low-functioning students, because at the former school it was implied he was not performing badly enough in relation to the children in his class to receive any help. We expressed our belief that the tests were not reflecting his ability, and his outstanding teacher took it upon herself to ensure he tested with her so he would not click through the testing without trying. Establishing an accurate benchmark allowed her to apply reading

interventions which led to him making two years' progress in one year. We regularly

checked in and followed her recommendations for working with him at home.

Duquette and colleagues used the dimensions of advocacy as a framework for

researching the advocacy tasks of parents of children and adolescents with learning

disabilities (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011) and giftedness

(Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Several implications of these

studies inform the role of foster parent as advocate. Effective advocacy occurs when the

parent is actively involved in the school, banking relational credits which are debited

when the child has a need; also, parents who are perceived to be allies, not adversaries,

realize more positive outcomes for their children (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, &

Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Moving from one dimension to the next is caused by trigger

events like the child's performance on a test, an assessment indicating exceptionalities, or

the completion of the individualized education plan (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, &

Robertson-Grewal, 2011).

In summary, Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund's (2011) dimensions of

parental educational advocacy will serve as the supporting framework for this study.

Extending the dimensions to foster parents will allow for parallels between foster parents

and educational advocates to emerge. As foster parents move through the dimensions—

awareness, seeking information, presenting the case, and monitoring—what are their

experiences, and what are their challenges? This inquiry may lead to a richer

understanding of parental educational advocacy and a canon of best practices for foster

parents advocating for the foster youth in their care.

Summary

For a youth in foster care, success in school is often a lofty ideal, blocked by a number of obstacles. Although federal and state policy and funding have improved, the educational attainment rates of foster youth have not improved to an adequate level (National Working Group for Foster Care and Education, 2014). The percentage of foster youth being left behind the national average of high school and postsecondary completion speaks to their lack of access not only to education itself, but also to its inherent benefits. Low educational attainment threatens to leave many foster youth in the poverty cycle (Vilorio, 2016). The financial and health benefits of educational attainment in the U.S. are well-documented (Hahn & Truman, 2015; Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). The extent to which this deficit exists is becoming more understood as states implement the reporting mandates of federal legislation, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (Bauer & Thomas, 2019). As states and the federal government move toward more systematic data collection and reporting of the educational attainment rates of foster youth, they will become more accountable to join the conversation about the barriers to educational attainment for foster youth.

The barriers to educational attainment for foster youth include cognitive and behavioral challenges (Scherr, 2007; Young, Gardner, & Dennis, 1998; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004), difficulty accessing appropriate special education services (Kelly, 2000; Lightfoot, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004), negative school experiences (Calvin, 2001; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012; Kelly, 2000; Loetzerich, 2017; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004), emotional outcomes of living in foster care (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Powers, et al.,

2018; Morton, 2015a), and the effects of trauma (Cage, 2018; Morton, 2015b). The barriers on the foster youth's path to obtaining a high school diploma illuminates the need for ongoing, intentional, effective interventions.

Interventions recommended in studies about the educational attainment of foster youth include collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies (Kelly, 2000; Loetzerich, 2017), programs focusing on foster youth success (Kelly, 2000; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016), financial resources for foster youth (Font, Berger, Cancian, & Noyes, 2018), application of a trauma-informed approach (Berardi & Morton, 2017), and supportive adults (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Supportive adults who take on the role of educational advocate can positively impact the educational attainment of foster youth (Skilbred, Iversen & Moldestad, 2017), and foster parents are uniquely situated to serve as educational advocates (DeGarmo, 2015).

The dimensions of parental educational advocacy identified by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011) will be the supporting framework for this study. The dimensions describe how parents become educational advocates and take action as their understanding of their children's needs evolves. Extending the dimensions—awareness, seeking information, presenting the case, and monitoring—to foster parents will allow for parallels between foster parents and educational advocates to emerge. This inquiry may lead to a richer understanding of parental educational advocacy and a canon of best practices for foster parents advocating for the foster youth in their care.

This qualitative study will use a phenomenological approach and will seek to answer the research questions *How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster youth?* and, *What challenges do foster parents face as they serve as educational advocates?* The primary form of data collection will be in-depth interviews of eight to 10 foster parents. By extending educational advocacy research to foster parents, this study will highlight the need for foster youth to have educational advocates and the ways in which that need is, or is not, being met.

Section 4:

Contribution to Practice

The practitioner product is a website with the title and web address of

Fostereducation.net. The website is intended to equip Missouri foster parents with

educational advocacy resources. It includes a database of relevant legislation and

educational resources for foster parents, recommendations for advocacy, and research

about the experiences of foster parents serving as educational advocates. Screenshots and

descriptions of the main pages and secondary pages of the website follow. All images

were obtained from Adobe Stock.

Home Page

The home page is a landing page for the website and directs visitors to the five

main information pages: *Why Advocate, How to Advocate, Resources, Legislation,* and

Research.

Why Advocate Page

The *Why Advocate* page introduces visitors to the problem, which is the low

educational attainment rates of foster children. It also states the purpose of the website:

equipping foster parents to serve as educational advocates. Finally, the page includes a

short biography of the website author.

How to Advocate Page

The *How to Advocate* page describes the four dimensions of advocacy (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011) in everyday language. This page will evolve to include videos of foster parents who share their advocacy experiences.

How Do I Advocate for My Foster Child

Resources

The *Resources* page contains a repository of web resources and documents to empower foster parents with tools for their advocacy work.

MISSOURI FOSTER PARENTS
Advocating for the Educational Needs of Children from Hard Places

Why Advocate   How to Advocate   Resources   Legislation   Research
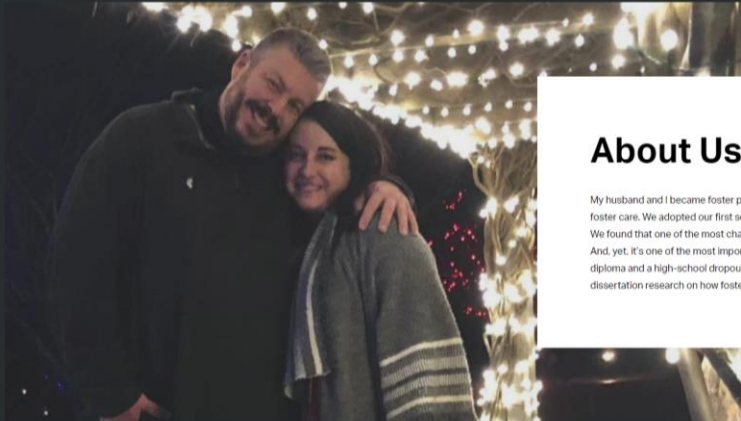
Resources

PRESCHOOL

Parents as Teachers

Search for state-contracted daycares

First Steps

ELEMENTARY

The Parent's Guide to Special Education in Missouri

Trauma-informed schools

Reading resources

State-contracted aftercare programs

MIDDLE/SECONDARY SCHOOL

Older Youth Transitional Specialists (Transitional Living and Chafee referrals)

HiSet

Missouri Course Access and Virtual School Program (MOCAP)

Dual Credit and Dual Enrollment

Advanced Placement (AP)

A+ Program

COLLEGE

Missouri Department of Higher Education and Workforce Development's Journey to College

Chafee Foster Care Program for Successful

Legislation

The *Legislation* page illustrates the structure of the Missouri foster care system and lists legislation relevant to educational advocacy for foster children.
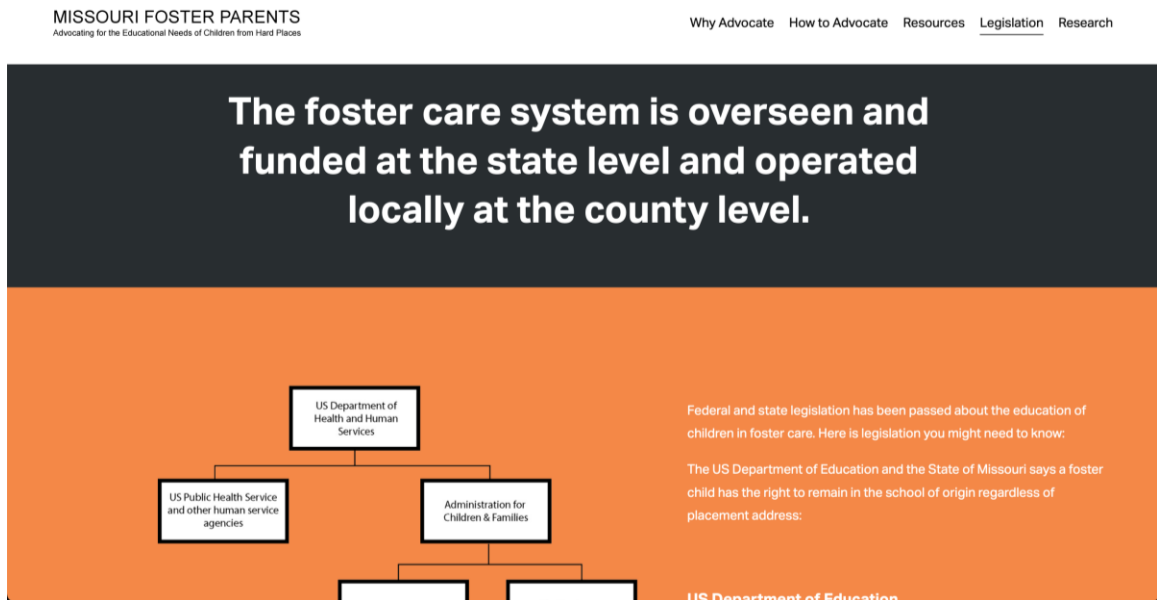
Research

The *Research* page is a landing page for this study and other studies related to the educational advocacy of foster parents. This page will grow as further research is conducted on the topic.

My Research

Other Research

Section 5:

Contribution to Scholarship

MISSOURI FOSTER PARENTS:

ADVOCATING FOR THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

OF CHILDREN FROM HARD PLACES

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A proposal for *Journal of At-Risk Issues*

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by

SARAH THORNTON

JULY 2021

Abstract

This qualitative study explored the educational advocacy behaviors of Missouri foster parents. The dimensions of advocacy (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011) framed the study. Eight foster mothers participated in a three-interview series which focused on experiences and challenges advocating for the educational needs of their foster children. Findings indicated the dimensions of advocacy applied in unique ways to foster parents, and the repercussions of trauma, including self-esteem and identity issues, were identified as a significant challenge.

Statement of the Problem

The educational attainment rates of foster youth are abysmal, and positive changes in policy and funding have not improved the rates to an adequate level. Research shows a positive relationship exists between the educational attainment of older youth in foster care and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Neal, 2017). This study explored foster parents as supportive adults, specifically, *educational advocates*.

Educational advocacy comes from the field of special education and refers to behaviors of supportive adults who intervene and mediate for a child or someone who cannot advocate for self. This study expanded educational advocacy research (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011; Mulick & Butter, 2002; Olivos, Jimenez-Castellanos, & Ochoa, 2011; Wilson Cooper, 2007) to foster parents. The four dimensions of advocacy proposed by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011), *awareness, seeking information, presenting the case, and monitoring,*

framed the study. The interview protocol followed the four dimensions, exploring how foster parents tacitly advocate for the educational needs of their foster children.

This qualitative study with a phenomenological approach sought to answer the research questions *How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster children?* and *What challenges do foster parents face as they serve as educational advocates?* Data collection included in-depth interviews of eight foster parents. This study provides a research foundation for additional research, with the hope of helping to ensure an educational advocate, foster parent or otherwise, is engaged in advocacy behaviors for every foster child in Missouri.

Literature Review

Low educational attainment threatens to leave many foster youth in the poverty cycle (Vilorio, 2016). The financial and health benefits of educational attainment in the U.S. are well-documented (Hahn & Truman, 2015; Hummer & Hernandez, 2013). The barriers to educational attainment for foster youth include cognitive and behavioral challenges (Scherr, 2007; Young, Gardner, & Dennis, 1998; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004), difficulty accessing appropriate special education services (Kelly, 2000; Lightfoot, 2014; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014; Zetlin, 2006; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004), negative school experiences (Calvin, 2001; Hahnel & Van Zile, 2012; Kelly, 2000; Loetzerich, 2017; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Luderer, 2004), emotional outcomes of living in foster care (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Powers, et al., 2018; Morton, 2015a), and the effects of trauma (Cage, 2018; Morton, 2015b). The barriers on the foster youth's path to obtaining a high school diploma illuminates the need for ongoing, intentional, effective interventions.

Interventions recommended in studies about the educational attainment of foster youth include collaboration between schools and child welfare agencies (Kelly, 2000; Loetzerich, 2017), programs focusing on foster youth success (Kelly, 2000; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Kinarsky, 2017; Salazar, Haggerty, & Roe, 2016), financial resources for foster youth (Font, Berger, Cancian, & Noyes, 2018), application of a trauma-informed approach (Berardi & Morton, 2017), and supportive adults (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Two characteristics recur often throughout the literature about interventions for foster youth: a trauma-informed approach to education and supportive adults.

Trauma-Informed Approach

Because of the complex trauma inherent to the background of the foster child, any interventions must consider and respond to the effects of the trauma. Studies using the Center for Disease Control's *Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ACE) instruments have explored the health impacts of childhood trauma, linking experiences like direct and indirect abuse, divorce, and disruption to disease, disability, social problems, and early death (CDC, n.d.). The ACE score for foster youth is generally high, and the adverse experiences are often profound: complex trauma, extreme or prolonged trauma which seems inescapable, results in more immediate issues with attachment, regulation, cognition, and self-concept (Cloitre, M., Miranda, R., Stovall-McClough, K. C., & Han, H., 2005). A majority of foster youth experienced complex trauma prior to their entrance into foster care (Steenbakkers, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2019). Additionally, foster youth perceive the loss associated with disruption from their families of origin as

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significantly traumatic (Steenbakkers, van der Steen, & Grietens, 2019). Approximately 25% of foster youth are at risk of developing post-traumatic stress disorder; the non-foster youth risk is around 7% (Pecora et al., 2005; Vacca, 2008).

Those serving youth who have experienced trauma are increasingly utilizing a trauma-informed approach to navigate the complex cognitive and emotional challenges caused by toxic stress (Stevens, 2012). A trauma-informed approach integrates concepts from traumatology, attachment theory, neurobiology, and development (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Trauma-sensitive interventions such as attachment-focused behavioral strategies and sensory integration techniques lead to a decreased level of trauma symptoms and improved socioemotional and relational skills (Crosby, Day, Baroni, & Somers, 2019). A trauma-informed approach to education sets the most conducive environment for foster youth to learn (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Educators, psychologists, and behavioral experts have developed a number of attachment-informed models to propagate replication of effective practice. Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI®) is one such model (Purvis, Cross, Dansereau, & Parris, 2013). The TBRI® model and other trauma-informed models are gaining momentum as foster parents and other caregivers, teachers, and counselors implement them and find their principles effective at addressing the needs of children from hard places and, over time, at making forward progress behaviorally and emotionally.

Supportive Adults

Several studies point to the importance of a supportive adult, advocate, mentor, liaison, or volunteer "buddy" to help the foster youth navigate the educational system or collaborate with the school system (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017;

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Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Vacca, 2008; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). A positive relationship exists between educational attainment of foster youth and the presence of supportive adults in their lives (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas & Tis, 2017; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Gypen, Vanderfaeillie, De Maeyer, Belenger, & Van Holen, 2017; Neal, 2017; Weinberg, Oshiro, & Shea, 2014). Because of their unique set of challenges and background, foster youth need supportive adults to be assertive and skilled allies who act as their educational advocates (Loetzerich, 2017; Silvia, 2007; Weinberg, Oshiro & Shea, 2014). They also benefit from mentors who support their self-determination and agency (Powers et al., 2018).

Research indicates foster parents can positively impact foster youths' educational attainment. In their qualitative study of high-achieving former foster youth, Skilbred, Iversen and Moldestad (2017) investigated what foster parents did right and found three major patterns: foster parents treated foster youth as if they were their biological children, which helped them feel a sense of belonging; foster parents taught and demonstrated values like work ethic; and foster parents established routines and structures, which indicated care and expectations to their foster youth.

Supporting Framework

The supporting framework for this study was the dimensions of parental educational advocacy identified by Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund (2011) during their study of adoptive parents of children with fetal alcohol syndrome. The four dimensions of educational advocacy, *awareness, seeking information, presenting the case,* and *monitoring*, are not always sequential; in fact, parents may be performing tasks

from all four dimensions simultaneously (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011).

Awareness refers to the ways in which parents come to notice learning differences in their children. Parents become aware of differences through a variety of data points: observations, parent-teacher conferences, report cards, standardized testing results, one-on-one study sessions with their children, and referrals for special services. *Seeking information* is the stage in which parents pursue assessments for their children and investigate potential resources to support their children's learning. Parents may begin the long process of pursuing an accurate diagnosis, or of identifying experts, or of researching their own methods for addressing learning needs. *Presenting the case* is the dimension whereby parents seek to convince school personnel and other important stakeholders of their children's educational needs. This dimension requires persistence on the part of parents, because many schools are overburdened by discipline referrals and requests for special-education services. The fourth dimension, *monitoring*, speaks to the follow-up activities of parents as they proactively ensure their children's educational plans are being followed and needs are being met. Educational plans may be formal Individual Education Plans (IEP) or 504 Plans, or informal agreements between parents and school personnel.

Duquette and colleagues used the dimensions of advocacy as a framework for researching the advocacy tasks of parents of children and adolescents with learning disabilities (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011) and giftedness (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Several implications of these studies inform the role of foster parent as advocate. Effective advocacy occurs when the

parent is actively involved in the school, banking relational credits which are debited

when the child has a need; also, parents who are perceived to be allies, not adversaries,

realize more positive outcomes for their children (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, &

Robertson-Grewal, 2011). Moving from one dimension to the next is caused by trigger

events like the child's performance on a test, an assessment indicating exceptionalities, or

the completion of the individualized education plan (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, &

Robertson-Grewal, 2011).

Methodology

Qualitative research is well-suited for studying experiences and interpreting their

meaning (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), and interviews allow the researcher to tell people's

stories (Seidman, 2013). This study used a phenomenological approach, which is

effective for studying emotional or intense human experiences (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). The product of a phenomenological study is a composite description, or *essence,*

of the experience for "several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a

phenomenon" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76).

Data Collection

Data collection for the study included qualitative interviews and a researcher

journal in which the researcher responded to the interview protocol. The interview

protocol used in this study followed Seidman's three-interview model (2013) and aligned

with the supporting framework. Creswell (2014) indicated the number of participants is a

function of the type of qualitative approach being used; a phenomenological study

generally includes three to 10 individuals. A recruitment email was sent to foster care

licensing agencies in Missouri with a proposal describing the study. Respondents were

eleven foster mothers from across Missouri; eight of the eleven followed through with the interview process. Four live in small towns, two in suburban areas outside large cities, and two in mid-size cities. They range in age and years of foster parenting experience. Two have had one long-term placement which became adoptive; two have had over twenty long-term placements; and four have fostered between five and ten placements. Five participants have also adopted through foster care, one has adopted through both private and foster care, and one is in the process of adopting through foster care. Five participants had one or more foster placements at the time of their interviews. Six participants are married; two are single. Three have raised or are in the process of raising biological children. Additionally, the researcher's experiences were captured in the researcher journal and were included in data analysis as Participant R.

Data Analysis

Based on Seidman's (2013) guidance, coding did not take place until all of the interviews were completed, in order to avoid impacting the outcomes of the other interviews. Based on Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step analysis process, the first transcribed interview was read using *open coding*, noting any potentially relevant bits of data. Open coding of interviews resulted in thirty-one initial categories. Next, *axial coding* was used to group the codes into larger categories. Through further analysis, three major themes emerged: foster parents' dimensions of advocacy (with subthemes of awareness, seeking information, presenting the case, and monitoring) (Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011), the powerful impacts of trauma, and injured self-worth.

Validity strategies. To validate the accuracy of the findings in qualitative research, the researcher employed *validity strategies* (Creswell, 2013; Creswell, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Tracy, 2010). This study implemented three of Tracy's (2010) recommendations for qualitative research: rich rigor, sincerity, and credibility. *Rich rigor* ensures the breadth and depth of data collection and analysis is sufficient to support findings (Tracy, 2010). Utilizing a three-interview process (Seidman, 2013) and including eight to 10 participants in a variety of settings provided a "rich complexity of abundance" (Tracy, 2010, p. 841). *Sincerity* is demonstrated by including a researcher positionality statement and noting the limitations of the study (Creswell, 2014; Tracy, 2010). *Credibility* refers to a study's believability (Tracy, 2010). The most important strategy for increasing credibility is using *thick description* to show the reader the scene so he or she may come to his or her own conclusions (Creswell, 2014; Tracy, 2010). The researcher thoroughly collected and described the participants' experiences.

Positionality statement. The researcher was a licensed foster and adoptive parent for twelve years; during that time, she and her husband fostered ten children and adopted four of them. The fact that every child who entered their home required a level of educational advocacy sparked her interest in this topic. The researcher described their educational experience with 17-year-old Jeremy in the researcher journal:

> I can vividly recall the day when his vice principal called to tell me he had crossed a line in her office and would be suspended for ten days for disrespect. She proceeded to tell me I might as well make plans to send him to a different school, probably an alternative school, because he would not make it the rest of the year there. This was the fall of his senior year, and he was on-track to graduate if the frequent maximum suspensions did not derail him completely. Her call deflated me, because this young man in our care had verbalized his desire to graduate from his school of origin. I could understand why the vice principal reacted with such an extreme punishment; his temper and snide comments challenged our patience as well, but we knew his background well enough to

know why he had developed some less desirable behaviors. My husband and I took her threat as a challenge. We were present and vocal. We reminded the administration that one outcome of childhood trauma is an intense fight-or-flight response instinct, and Jeremy generally chose "fight." We scheduled meetings with the head principal and assistant principal throughout the year to ask why they gave maximum suspensions for everything and what we could do to see him graduate. Jeremy experienced two ten-day suspensions at the beginning of the year for threatening to fight other students. When the school resource officer aggressively questioned Jeremy after school, my husband intervened by stepping between them and deescalating both parties, likely preventing one more suspension had he felt cornered. To our son's credit, he graduated with his class, but I have to wonder if the outcome would have been different had he not been living with very assertive foster parents who believe a high school diploma is worth a fight. We adopted Jeremy the summer following his high school graduation. We are proud to say he is a high school graduate, he can always find a job, and he provides for his daughter.

To avoid impacting the participant's responses, the researcher did not disclose her foster and adoptive parent experiences.

Findings

All eight participants indicated it was their role to advocate for their foster children; however, they were not all certain whether all foster parents feel the same. Three participants noted they were going over and above in their approach to educational advocacy. Participant 7 noted, *I feel like if you get a home with a very proactive foster parent, your kids will succeed, but if you do the bare minimum, the state will let you do the bare minimum.* Participant 1 added, *If I didn't do anything, I don't know what [the FST] would do about it. . . . If you're asking if there's a baseline, there's a certain amount of expectation for education, I would say no.* Participant 2 summarized her self-perception of her role: *My role was really that, that champion, to try to keep some consistency.* The remainder of the findings support the participants' active belief in their role as educational advocates.

The first theme is responsive to the first research question, *How do foster parents serve as educational advocates for foster children?* and aligns with the supporting framework, Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund's (2011) dimensions of parental educational advocacy. The second and third themes speak to the second research question, *What challenges do foster parents experience as they serve as educational advocates?* All eight participants pointed to the repercussions of trauma and self-worth and identity issues as significant factors in educational advocacy.

Theme 1: Foster parents' dimensions of advocacy

Awareness of need: No cookie cutter.

Gaining an awareness of the needs of a new placement is an investigative process. Participant 8 noted this is not an easy process: *It's very difficult in the very beginning, when they're placed with you trying to learn what their level is, what their grade level is, and what their subjects are. But you got to start at the bottom and work your way up. And don't get discouraged, because it will get better. It just takes time. But it will get better.* One participant suggested that every child who enters foster care receive an educational evaluation which becomes part of an education file which follows him or her until age 21.

Over time, participants became confident in their understanding of the learning needs of the children in their care. They relied on documentation like IEPs, standardized tests, psychiatric evaluations, and caseworker notes to establish initial benchmarks about unmet educational needs, but they also left room for their own observations. Participant 6 noted the limitations of relying on caseworker notes: *[Y]ou don't know these kids' history at school, like you get the history that's given to you from someone that doesn't*

actually know anything about what's going on with the kid. She described the dissonance between her foster daughter's benchmarks and the underlying causes: *She didn't do her work, you know, and she was flunking and she got in trouble at school. But it's like, why was all that? You know. Why was this happening?* Psychiatric evaluations were particularly helpful in explaining the underlying reasons for learning problems; for instance, Participant 8 requested a psychiatric evaluation for her foster son, and the test revealed an ADHD diagnosis. She said the diagnosis and medication changed everything for him, because then she and his teachers understood he is *not unwilling, but unable to focus when he's not on his medication.*

Personal observations and informal experiences also informed the participants' awareness. Participant 4 noted, *There's no cookie cutter, so [we] work with them to find out what they are capable of so that we can challenge them.* She noticed soon after placement that one of her teenage sons paced back-and-forth repeatedly, and she knew immediately he would not be able to learn at school if he could not sit still. Participant 8 recalled her son's ninth birthday, a few months after he entered her home. Her mother gave him a card, and he could not read the words, *Happy Birthday.* Participant 7 referred to her preschool son's potty-training incidents, during which he pulled down his pants and defecated on the rug, and the preschool teachers laughed in response. Participant 6 heard from another foster mother that she saw her 6-year-old foster daughter sitting in a safety seat, isolated, facing the wall in the cafeteria during lunch. She and her husband had not been notified of this punishment. When she called the school, the principal did not deny that she had been isolated at lunch for quite some time. Participant R remembered seeing her son's behavior chart at a parent-teacher conference. He had two

stickers compared to the rest of his classmates' poster board rows full of gold stars. These defining moments clarified the participants' understanding of their children's unmet needs. Participants recognized that the needs of the children who enter their homes were not *cookie cutter*. Operating within the first dimension of advocacy, awareness of need, participants used documentation, observations, and informal experiences to become more aware of their children's needs.

Seeking information: Nothing traditional or normal about it.

Once the participants became aware of cognitive, social, or emotional needs, they asked questions and researched options for their foster children. Participant 1 referred to a time when her foster daughter was reading below grade level but the school said her levels were not low enough to qualify for tutoring or extra services. She asked the school for an IEP review in hopes that would qualify her for services. Participant 7 listed play therapy, occupational therapy, and Level A training as resources she and her husband found for their son. She also asked the school for *someone to hold his hand from one place to another, have someone to talk to, and they told me that that was outside their realm of services and to contact his doctor*. She contacted his doctor. Two participants pursued private school options. One set up Parents as Teachers right after her foster daughter entered her home. Participant R asked their therapist for recommendations, which led to an ADHD diagnosis and a stimulant prescription. Every participant referred to an exploration of occupational, physical, and mental health therapy options for their children.

Participants created their own support systems and called upon their expertise. Among the people mentioned in their support groups were other foster parents, family

members, neighbors, church members, licensing workers and agencies, caseworkers, therapists and doctors. Participant 4 recalled a therapist's support when she needed it most: *[W]e were in a therapy session, and she looked at my arms, and I was black and blue, you know, scratches and bruises and bite marks and everything . . . . she immediately started typing out a list of resources.*

They also found empathetic insiders at their children's schools. Three participants referred to specific administrative assistants who became their go-to's for enrollment and resource questions. Two participants had raised biological children in the school districts within which they were enrolling foster children, and they found their background knowledge beneficial as they sought out the best teachers and resources for their foster children's individual needs. Participant 3 said it this way: *The district's actually very quick to respond because . . . . [I] know how to say things and who to say them to get things done.* Participant 5 asked her foster daughter's school counselor to map out an aggressive plan so her daughter could graduate on time. Participant 3 pointed to her foster daughter's assistant principal as being i*n [her daughter's] corner*; the assistant principal attended Family Support Team meetings and served as a mentor. Participant 6 noted one especially gifted school principal in their district who was a former special education teacher. Participant 2's experiences also indicated some people work with her son better than others: *We've gotten some phenomenal heroes of teachers and then some who don't have that capacity or time for whatever reason who just want to go by the book or the structure.* Overall, her perception of the school district is very positive, especially a few school leaders who *ben[t] over backwards to do whatever it takes to keep him going. And that's whatever it takes, it's nothing traditional or normal*

about it . . . . willing to go beyond the extra effort . . . . trying to get him to graduation. The second dimension of advocacy, seeking information, involved asking questions and researching, forming and utilizing a support system, and leaning on relationships with insiders.

Presenting the case: They all know me whether they want to or not.

To compel others to support their foster children's educational needs, participants built relational capital. Participant 4 focused on how important relationship-building is in working effectively with schools: *Whenever they've come and we've enrolled them in school, I've always gone and met the teacher personally. And then, as I say, always had daily communication with them. So I've never had a problem.* Participant 6 used humor to describe her active presence:

> *I've spent a lot of time at the schools, I've sat in lots of classes. I've done lots of weird things that most parents probably don't, sat in lots of third grade lunches. And, you know, like, oh, cool. So nowadays, they all know me whether they want to or not.*

With a more serious tone, she explained how teachers call her when they cannot motivate or de-escalate one of her children, so she has excellent relationships with them because she helps.

Participants were assertive and proactive as they advocated for their foster children's educational needs. Participants used words like *loud, backbone, battle,* and *hot to trot,* to describe their responses to school personnel who were unsupportive or enacted inequitable accommodations. Participant R formally requested she or her husband be called prior to the school resource officer or the assistant principal meeting with their son. Participant 6 told the story of her foster son who rode his bike to school on a regular basis, and one day some boys took his bike to bully him. When she and her husband met

with the assistant principal, they were astonished by his solution: their son should leave his bike at home so the boys would not take it from him. They said no to that solution because it penalized their son who had done nothing wrong.

Participant 7's teenage foster daughter had attended a for-profit online high school before coming to their home. Her biological parents had not paid the balance on the account, so the school would not release the transcript. The caseworker suggested they start over on her high school credits, but Participant 7 instead contacted the guardian ad litem, who made a case that the transcript belonged to the student regardless of her parents' financial irresponsibility. She then made sure the counselor applied the transcript to her foster daughter's high school credits and allowed her to take a heavy course load so she could graduate on time. She noted,

> *I advocated 100% on my own for that. So I just feel like, depending on what position she was in, or what home she was placed in, or if she was still in the group home because that's where she was before us, I don't think she would be graduating this year.*

Participants were intentional about their foster children seeing their advocacy on their behalf because it demonstrated that they cared. Participant 1 modeled self-advocacy to her teenage daughters and slowly passed the baton to them so they learned how to advocate for themselves. Participant R scheduled meetings with the lead principal, assistant principal, and school counselor at the beginning of a teenage placement, to make sure everyone, including the teenager, knew she was actively involved. Participant 6 shared,

> *It's important for them to see someone that will go to the school and kind of fight for them . . . . because when no one's ever cared if you succeeded or not, you don't tend to have any self-effort towards that goal.*

Participants acted within the third dimension of advocacy, presenting the case, by building relational capital, advocating assertively and proactively, and modeling self-advocacy.

Monitoring: The best parents show up.

Participants continued to mark their foster children's progress and regularly communicated with school personnel to ensure adjustments were made. Participant 1 spoke of her foster daughter's teachers counting missing assignments against her from the time period during which she was placed in another district. She asked the teachers to take the grades out of the calculation, but the zeros were still there weeks later. She called the counselor to ask her to address it with the teachers. Still, the zeros remained, so she said she would be following up again. Participant 4 shared that in their experience, daily communication is integral to success:

> *I really wanted to know what they were doing at school every day, so we could reinforce it at home. And there was no communication with the teacher before. So we were able to do a daily communication log. . . . We met with the teacher and asked for some examples of what he was doing, followed that up at home and then sent her examples of what he was actually doing at home as well.*

Participants 6 and 8 spoke of their sons making steady progress and modifying their IEPs to reduce special education services. Participant 5 expressed the importance of being physically present:

> *When you look at anything, a job, education, parenting, a lot of it is really about showing up, it's not about some kind of secret formula about like, guess why, you know, I'm the best parent in the world, because I did ABC and D. The best parents show up.*

In addition to being present at school, participants reinforced their children's education at home. When a gap in foundational skills existed, they worked to fill the gaps. Participant 8 said this about her son who could not read his birthday card at age 9:

Since that time, it'll be three years in March, we've worked very hard for him to come up from nothing to fourth grade reading level. They read a minimum of ten minutes per night, starting with Dr. Seuss and progressing to Hank Zipzer books. Determined to address her foster son's inability to sit still, Participant 4 used his passion for animals as a hook. She found a television series about animals, and they watched it together.

> *And we got to the point where he could watch a full episode without talking and by focusing and be able to discuss it afterwards, so I knew he was listening. And then from there, it, what's the word? It went across into the classroom, you know, and he was able to sit still during the course of the day and focus on work.*

They emphasized future orientation and backward planning. Participant 1 referred to a report she read which claimed that children who are not introduced to the idea of college by third grade do not see themselves as future college students. She is working with her daughters toward ambitious career goals. She explained her thought process:

> *I think it is a huge cognitive step, just to see yourself in life. . . . Think big. Let's get you there. I got two years to get you there. And I've got four years to get [your sister] there. Let's think big and see where we land.*

She signed her daughter up for summer school and hired a math tutor. She recruited the school librarian to help her challenge her daughter with more difficult books. Participant 7's daughter set lofty goals as well, to become a veterinarian:

> *My husband told her if you wanted to be an astronaut, [Mom] would have you signed up for Space Camp this summer. [S]he knows that she picked her goal. And we talked about everything it would take to get there. And now the hard part is she has to put in the work.*

The final dimension of advocacy, monitoring, was ongoing and, often, daily. *The best parents show up* by marking progress and communicating with teachers, reinforcing

education and gap-filling at home, and teaching their children how to set big goals and work toward them with smaller goals.

The Powerful Impacts of Trauma: *Rocks in his pockets*

For foster parents, their children's trauma impacts every other dimension of advocacy. For the most part, participants felt equipped to recognize and mitigate trauma triggers and behaviors. However, the more violent behavioral problems generally ended with the child being removed from their home and moved to residential placement. Their initial STARS training did not include in-depth trauma training, but the supplemental and Level A and Level B trainings did.

Every participant iterated that schools need more trauma training. Participant 6 became a trauma resource for the schools: *There's lots of times I've went to the school, just to deescalate a child, which I'm perfectly happy with doing if I needed to, but that's something that the school could, like given the right training.* She recalled her son's encounter with a large male principal during which he yelled at her son to go to the office and escorted him there. Although the principal could not have known the child's abuser was a large male, if he had been using a trauma-informed approach, he would have sat down quietly with the young man and talked him through the misbehavior.

Participants were keenly aware of their foster children's traumatic backgrounds and the corresponding cognitive and emotional impact. Specific trauma behaviors which affected school outcomes included fight-or-flight, emotional shutdowns, sensory overload, and poor coping skills. Participant 2's son, Jaden, often went to the nurse so he would be sent home or shut down in class and put his head down. She attributed these behaviors to fear:

He missed a lot of the lessons just with that fear of the classroom where he just would pull inside himself and just be gone . . . When he was little, he would, not so little, always put rocks and things in his coat pockets. And I always thought that was anchoring himself down because everything was just always moving.

Participant 3 correlated the cognitive and emotional impacts of trauma and potential problems in school:

She was so traumatized that she had missing skills, she had lost skills that she had previously because of the trauma. . . . It's mind boggling to me that we don't have more kids who are absolutely freaked out and not doing anything other than laying on the floor crying, when you've been ripped out of your comfort zone. . . . and you're expected to go to school.

Participant 4 referred to the stunting effects of trauma:

I think just emotionally, a lot of them are stuck at an age where the trauma occurred. And it's prevented them from moving forward in life...they just need that emotional support, and then just to be met, where they're at.

Although the participants were empathetic to their children's trauma, they knew allowing the children or their schools to lower their expectations would limit their futures. Participant 8 stated, *I am not going to downplay trauma, because that's a big deal. But the kids also need to learn that they can't use that as an excuse to, to walk away from something.* Participant 4 noticed the power of success: *Once they know they can do something that's hard, and they've worked through their trauma, they are more confident and more apt to try something more difficult.*

Participant 5 shared a story that demonstrates the challenges of advocating for a child whose behaviors, albeit a consequence of trauma, are dangerous to others. Her foster son, Khalil's, new school required him to participate in a retreat prior to the beginning of the school year. Although she and her husband communicated his behavioral concerns to the school administration, they still required it but let them know

they would need to come pick him up at the retreat a few hours away if he misbehaved.

On the second day, they received a call to come pick him up from the retreat because he

had attacked and injured another student. She expected him to be hateful on the ride

home; instead, he fell asleep before they made it off the camp property. She described

the tension she experienced during the meeting with the other child's family this way:

> *But like after he attacked that kid at the camp and they did you know, restorative justice meeting, um, you know, you've got, you know, assistant principal there, and counselors and the other parents. And the child Khalil comes in, and, like, he's chewing gum really loudly, and he sits down at the table. And he goes like this, back in the chair. With this kid who still has like, bruises on his face from when he was attacked. And I'm like, Are any of these people going to talk to him about his body language? And no one says anything, and I'm like, Khalil, you need to get rid of your gum. And you don't need to sit like that. And I'm like, what, you know, like, aren't these people supposed to be like professionals? And aren't they supposed to, like recognize, like, the vibe of the room. I don't know, I just I felt so bad for the other kid. You know, I'm supposed to be on Khalil's team or whatever. But the other kid was like, scared to be in the room with him. And it wasn't like a worked-up drama. And one of the things the school did is when they put Khalil in his group, his camp group, they put him with like, the nerds and the geeks. They thought like, oh, he'll be with like, the nice boys and he'll be able to like manage himself. Well, apparently, he was like, as soon as he got there, he like read the situation. And he like, started bullying them right away. And it was all underneath and insidious. And he ruined the experience for all those kids. Of course, because he's afraid. He doesn't know what's going on, you know?*

The combination of abuse, neglect, loss, and instability regularly experienced by

children in foster care causes fear and behaviors which impact school performance. Jaden

always putting *rocks in his pockets* provides an image of a boy constantly sensing the

possibility that his life could again be disrupted at any moment. He is unsettled and

afraid, which makes his shut-downs a natural response. None of the participants

mentioned they found a way to fix their children's feelings; instead, they became the

rocks. Participant 2 was there to pick him up every time he went to the nurse's office and

stayed home with him the rest of the day. She and her husband and their adult children

became an ever-present, consistent support system. At some point, Jaden stopped putting rocks in his pockets. That is not to say the impact of trauma has ended; Participant 2 emphasized that he still struggles. Perhaps he has accepted that his family tethers him so he can move forward.

Injured Self-Worth and Identity: *She's been shown she's not worth it.*

When they were asked open-ended questions about what keeps foster children from graduating from high school or college, five participants pointed to low self-worth as the most significant obstacle to learning and educational attainment. Participant 4 summarized the obstacle: *They lack the support and encouragement and the affirmation they need because I think emotionally, they've been through so much. . . . so they can't just go to school, you know, go into high school and expect to graduate.* Participant 3 explained how her teenage foster daughter, Shay's, self-worth connects to her school life:

> *She struggles a lot with education, to the point that she's like, I quit. I don't want to do school. This is stupid. I don't care what my grades are. And so part of that is her self-worth. That she's been shown through the years that she's not worth it, to work for things, to have someone come beside her and help her through those things.*

Starting with a high threshold of insecurity and fear, foster children need their foster parents and other adults to boost their confidence and reduce their anxiety. Participant 4 practices positive reinforcement, praising every good behavior, no matter how minor. She explained her philosophy: *I think that goes a long way to developing children from trauma . . . . where everything they've been through is bad, to opening up a whole new world of what they are doing right.* Facilitating small wins is another regular practice for several participants.

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Several participants noted that love and belonging must come first; only then can a child make progress in other areas. Participant 5 passionately argued that foster parents should make it very clear to their children that their love and acceptance is unconditional, completely separate from performance in school:

> *I want to be on top of this [school] stuff. But also have them realize that their worth . . . . does not depend on how they're performing at school. And also home should be a safe place, not just a continuation of a stress for the school . . . . Obviously education is important, but when you look at what is important, like if you were to actually prioritize importance, it is the child's need to be loved.*

Participant 4 also expressed the importance of unconditional love and acceptance: *They need to know that they're loved and cared for unconditionally, regardless of how they're doing at school.* Participant 3 described the importance of empathy:

> *But you've got to make sure you're always taking in their perspective of what they've gone through before. Whether it's lack of food. Now they're hoarding food, or they're struggling with authority, because they were the authority in their house growing up.*

Concerns about identity issues and their repercussions were woven throughout the participants' narrative, demonstrated by words and phrases like *you have a purpose here, finding out who they are, don't try to be someone else, wants to project some kind of image,* and *they feel like a failure.* Several participants drew conclusions about multiple placements causing identity crises. Participant 8 pointed out the foster child is forced to adapt to a new normal every time he or she enters a new home; therefore, the natural identity development process does not occur. Participant 2 discussed the importance of keeping a child grounded in community as much as is humanly possible by maintaining their school of origin and other positive connections:

> *There's no reason except for adult issues, that they wipe that out, as well as their family and everything else, you know, every other identity is erased every time*

they get moved. . . . There's not that comprehensive look at keeping a world around the child, an identity around the child.

Several participants shared stories about children pulled from or moved to their homes at the most disruptive times of school, causing missed celebrations and unnecessary angst.

Participant 2 suggested if adults would look through the child's eyes, many unfortunate mistakes could be prevented. She shared several incidents that made Jaden feel like an outcast because the adults failed to consider his feelings. One incident occurred when he was placed in an honors class because of his test scores. The insensitive teacher said to him, *You know, this is a really, really bright class and I'm not sure it's going to work. But if you want to we can try.* Participant 2 knew the teacher had tainted the class for Jaden; she predicted,

> *There goes the year, right? You know because he just told Jaden I don't think you can do it. And that's exactly what happened . . . . if you just want to go by your typical performance, you're telling him he's a failure, he's gonna believe that he's a failure . . . . the kids in foster care, kids from any marginalized subgroup, they're looking for someone to tell them who they are. And we're telling them.*

To intervene in their foster children's identity development, foster parents modify their approach to fit the child's identity needs, surrounding them with opportunities to explore new activities and friendships and resources like therapy to help them process their unique backgrounds. At the time of the interview with Participant 3, Shay was processing with her therapist the court terminating her biological mother's rights to be her parent. Several participants also mentioned the importance of treating foster children as if they were biological. Participant 7 stated, *We raise all of our kids, whether they're here a week or a month or five years or forever, we treat all of our foster kids like we would our own kids.*

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An injured self-worth and identity negatively impacts the foster child's

educational attainment. Participant 8 linked purpose and self-worth with graduation

rates:

> *They have to be taught that you have a purpose here. And that, that what you're doing is good enough, regardless of what other people think, what you're doing is good enough and you cannot compare yourself to them. But if those kids are able to raise their self-esteem and understand that they have worthiness, I think that then their graduation rates will go up significantly.*

In Shay's case, she had *been shown through the years that she's not worth it* by a mother

who never took the time to help her with homework or show up to parent-teacher

conferences but willingly shared drugs with her. Participant 3 is teaching Shay *to work*

for things and is determined *to [be the] someone [to] come beside her and help her*

through those things. The participants intentionally work to build confidence in their

foster children by loving them unconditionally, surrounding them with community and

opportunity, and praising every positive action.

Discussion

Three major themes emerged in response to the research questions, *How do foster*

parents serve as educational advocates for foster children? and *What challenges do*

foster parents experience as they serve as educational advocates? The first theme, foster

parents' dimensions of advocacy, aligns with the supporting framework, Duquette,

Stodel, Fullarton, and Hagglund's (2011) dimensions of parental educational advocacy.

The participants' advocacy included all four dimensions: awareness of need, seeking

information, presenting the case, and monitoring. The second theme, the powerful

impacts of trauma, and the third theme, injured self-worth and identity, speak to the

challenges foster parents experience as they serve as educational advocates. All eight

participants pointed to the repercussions of trauma and self-worth and identity issues as significant factors in educational advocacy.

Similar to biological and adoptive parents in previous studies about parental educational advocacy (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011; Duquette, Stodel, Fullarton, & Hagglund, 2011), participants were fully aware of foster children's need for an advocate, and they took on that role without questioning it. None of the participants were charged with this role or were trained on interaction with schools during their initial 30-hour STARS training. They were simply told they were required to enroll new foster placements in school immediately, and they took it from there. The lack of systematic role clarification is of concern.

Participants moved through all four dimensions of advocacy in much the same way as parents in previous studies by Duquette, et al. They used their insider status or built relationships with insiders, and they believed if they did not monitor, their children would not receive the supports they needed (Duquette, Fullarton, Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). However, the foster parent experience is unique when it comes to the *awareness of need* dimension because in most cases, they did not know their children more than a few days before enrolling them in school.

The most significant challenges to the participants' educational advocacy were their children's traumatic backgrounds and low self-worth and identity issues. Participants believe those two factors stunted their children's educational progress, which affirms claims that complex trauma negatively impacts self-esteem and cognition (Cloitre, Miranda, Stovall-McClough, & Han, 2005; Steenbakkers, van der Steen, &

Grietens, 2019) and emotional outcomes of living in the foster care system impede

educational attainment (Berardi & Morton, 2017; Morton, 2015a; Morton, 2015b;

Powers, et al., 2018).

Implications

This study was limited to Missouri foster parents, and the participants'

characteristics point to additional limitations. All eleven respondents were women, and

only eight participants' experiences were examined. Married participants indicated they

were the primary educational advocates to their foster children, which aligns with

previous studies indicating mothers are generally the advocates (Duquette, Fullarton,

Orders, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011). The recruitment process included the topic of the

study, so respondents were likely to have an interest in educational advocacy. Therefore,

the study is unlikely to represent foster parents who do not believe educational advocacy

is their role. The study only speaks to the foster parents' experiences, not the schools' or

foster children's. Regardless of the limitations, the study's findings are helpful in

understanding the unique needs of foster parents and children. Three implications are

discussed here.

First, the lack of role clarification needs to be addressed. As the findings

suggested, participants believed it was their responsibility as parent to be their foster

children's educational advocates. They did not see it as the foster care system's or the

school system's responsibility to serve as educational advocates; instead, they noted the

importance of a team approach, with the foster parent as the primary expert about their

children. Several participants expressed concern about foster children who live with

passive foster parents or residential care. They were not confident the foster care system

would pick up the slack. A reasonable solution recommended by a participant in this study is an educational evaluation which becomes part of the child's file. That file could identify the child's educational advocate, share psychiatric and IEP information, give learning strengths and weaknesses, and keep record of progress toward educational goals. Research indicates improving collaboration between schools and the child welfare system (Loetzerich, 2017) improve educational outcomes, so the most favorable approach would include the foster parents or residential staff, caseworker, and school counselor or special education coordinator and principal.

Second, all eight participants agreed that schools need comprehensive trauma training. Although ideally every school employee would be trauma-trained, the priority is principals and assistant principals, because they are the disciplinarians. Experiencing trauma during childhood or adolescence results in behaviors ranging from "aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention-seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious, and over-compliant behaviors" (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004, p. 422), which lead to discipline issues. Around 7% of the general population has been suspended or expelled; among foster youth, that number is approximately 24% (Scherr, 2007). Foster youth are three times more likely than the average to receive disciplinary actions, including referrals, suspension, and expulsion (Scherr, 2007). Recurring discipline problems mean time out of the classroom, so existing gaps in knowledge and skills are exacerbated and become insurmountable (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2004). Participants were in agreement that Missouri equips foster parents with adequate trauma training; school leadership could collaborate with the foster care system to provide trauma training following the same model to maintain consistency for children interacting with both systems.

Third, foster youth need support in building self-worth and positive identities. Participants shared that building academic skills at home, facilitating small successes, using positive language which focuses on children's strengths, finding an extracurricular activity in which the child excels, and surrounding the child with supportive people are effective at improving self-worth and forming identities. Additionally, emphasizing future orientation combined with goal-setting and chunking tells children they are capable. Research supports the importance of messaging; when adults regularly expect foster children to accomplish something, they are more likely to accomplish it (Clemens, Helm, Myers, Thomas, & Tis, 2017). Participants emphasized love and belonging as the most important factor in increasing foster children's self-worth. Foster children need their foster families to treat them like family, showing them unconditional love regardless of performance. One participant prioritized caring this way:

> *I've just made like, tons of mistakes. But it has come from a place of trying and wanting to do well. And I think that that can be picked up. Like a child can hate what you're doing. But if there's a feeling that it's coming from a place of trying to help, even if it's the exact wrong thing to do, then . . . . they can sense that.*

This study further extends the four dimensions of educational advocacy to foster parents. Further research exploring educational advocacy of foster parents and other supports for improving educational attainment rates of foster children is needed. Additionally, the study calls for the implementation of statewide trauma training for schools in Missouri, a collaborative educational file for each child in foster care, and a greater emphasis on increasing foster children's self-worth. Improving educational outcomes for foster children is vitally important. Why do foster parents advocate for their foster children? Participant R summarized it this way:

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I have often said being a foster parent is the most wonderful and terrible thing I've ever done. It is wonderful because the kids who enter your home are extraordinary and you adore them, even though they drive you crazy. It is terrible because of the lack of control you feel every day. You don't even know if they'll be in your home tomorrow. It is terrible because you can't make up for the trauma they've experienced or do anything but keep them safe while they're in your home and be in their corner forever. Education is a tangible area we can impact. We can be at the parent-teacher conference. We can celebrate an A on a paper. We can email the teacher to ask clarifying questions. And, like Paulo Freire, I believe education is power. A high school graduate is much better off than a high school dropout, and I've seen firsthand the difference between the two might just be an assertive set of foster parents who show up and speak up.

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Section 6:

Scholarly Practitioner Reflection

How the Dissertation Influenced My Practice as an Educational Leader

The dissertation process itself transformed me as an educational leader; to quantify the change is not fully possible. I notice it most in the way I approach challenges. Transformation is borne of struggle, which is why transformative learning is an assumption of adult learner theory (Merriam & Bierema, 2014). Every step of the process required discipline and time. I underestimated how long each step would take; in fact, I applied to graduate three times because I estimated the finish line was closer than it was. To affirm my hard life decisions like fostering and adopting, a dear friend of mine often says to me, "Easier is not always better." I might broaden that to say, "Easier is rarely better." Pushing through the hard things, we have the opportunity to grow, which prepares us for more difficult challenges (Johnson, 2021). Successful leaders view hard times and difficult goals as high points in their career development; ineffective leaders become bitter and cynical (Johnson, 2021). Balancing the dissertation process with home and work life has felt like a tug-of-war in which I am the rope and the dissertation is the least aggressive contender. The struggle to carve out focused time periods between the entries on a chaotic family calendar and the emotional weight of significant issues with my children and my parents has taught me to capture every moment for a purpose and to push through in ways I have not had to do before. The struggle to recruit participants has inspired me to become more actively engaged. The struggle to finish what appeared to be a never-ending to-do list has empowered me to attack enormous projects in small chunks.

The combination of critical reflection and personal experience provides the best environment for transformative learning (Merriam & Bierema, 2014; Taylor, 2009).

While the team approach embedded in our coursework prompted some significantly reflective moments and growth, the solo nature of the dissertation process has served as an incubator for deep reflection. Merriam and Bierema (2014) noted it is the individual learner who is key to transformative learning: he or she "turns to questioning and examining long-held assumptions about the self and the world in which one lives" (p. 90). For instance, the dissertation process prompted me to ask big-picture questions about my potential professional impact. The questions began when Dr. Watson advised us to select dissertation topics which could keep our interest for two years. What could keep my interest for two years? After considering topics intersecting with my job in higher education, I landed instead on topics surrounding foster children and educational attainment, which did not make sense if the goal was to solve a problem of practice in my professional setting. However, it made sense if the goal was to select a "grand challenge" (Colquitt & George, 2011) that matters. I am thankful faculty mentors supported this outcome of critical reflection.

During a meeting with my advisor, Dr. Cynthia MacGregor (a.k.a., drmac), we talked about the content of my practitioner product, a website for sharing educational advocacy resources for foster parents. Toward the end of the conversation, she stated, "This could be your life's work." I left with that statement replaying in my head, along with this question: Why have I not been considering what my life's work might be? Having worked in an educational setting for twenty years, I had nearly forgotten how to imagine a world beyond my office walls. What will be my life's work? Dr. Karyn Purvis and her colleagues at Texas Christian University developed Trust-Based Relational Intervention through their work with adopted children at summer camps

(Purvis, Cross, Dansereau, & Parris, 2013). I vividly recall the first time I experienced Dr. Purvis' training and knew her life's work had changed everything for foster and adoptive families. She passed out hope with her stories of children whose treatment transformed them from detached and out-of-control to connected and self-controlled. Her life's work inspired me to keep trying with my son who calls me names more often than he calls me mom. My participants' life's work is not glamorous; at times, it is painful and full of sorrow. Their commitment to bold, relentless advocacy for their children inspired me. Who will my life's work inspire?

Had I not written the dissertation, the questions I ask of myself would certainly be shallower. My thinking has evolved to consider the potential impact of every action I take, including what I study. During data collection, all of my participants commented about the importance of the topic of educational advocacy for foster children and noted their appreciation for me choosing to study it. Several of them noted they wanted to see change. Until those moments, I had not considered the participants' desire to make an impact through the study. Until then, connecting with participants was a box on the checklist. Since then, I have viewed this study as our collective impact. My dissertation is the vessel through which their voices are heard, and that is, in and of itself, impactful, regardless of whether we move the needle on educational advocacy for foster youth. The responsibility to project their voices with accuracy is a burden I take seriously.

How can my personal transformation spark transformation in my work as an educational leader? Schultz (2010) argued that "a new vision of educational leadership must exist if schools are to emerge from their hierarchical, democratically antithetical, and marginalized cave" (p. 62). Similar to a qualitative researcher, an effective

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educational leader listens and gathers and draws out patterns and themes. The very core

of that process is listening (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009) and making meaning. During an

assignment in our leadership class, we were tasked with interviewing an educational

leader. One of the questions I asked Dr. Chris Craig, deputy provost of Missouri State

University, is how to avoid burnout amidst the bureaucracy of higher education. He

encouraged me to leverage my influence for good (Personal communication, September

9, 2017). Post-secondary educational attainment is the goal of my work with adults now.

How might I leverage my influence and expertise to improve outcomes for former foster

youth? Is there a way to combine my expertise in higher education with my passion for

foster and adoptive children and families?

Qualitative research requires inductive reasoning, allowing themes to emerge

from data bits converging into patterns (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I believe the

inductive reasoning that has developed through the data collection and analysis journey

has given me another tool in my decision-making toolbelt. In my experience,

administrators tend to start with an assumption and seek to obtain data to support their

belief; this model is much more efficient and tangible. However, some questions are

better answered by a qualitative approach, which is primarily comparative and inductive

(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

How the Dissertation Influenced Me as a Scholar

The dissertation process taught me how to think more systematically, situating the

study within the context of setting and history, designing the study with a direct

alignment of data collection to research questions, and writing with publication in mind.

During our research design courses, the instructional team brought to life the research

design principles of Creswell, Merriam and Tisdell, and Seidman. Dr. Sebastian introduced research design in the social sciences. I had learned research design in my master's program, but it was taught from a literary criticism approach. Dr. Sebastian's courses taught me to conduct a thorough literature review and to select the appropriate research design for the research questions. Dr. Ongaga emphasized research questions above all things: carefully write research questions and align the research design, all the way down to the last interview question, to the research questions. Dr. MacGregor encouraged me to narrow the study to a single topic and to collect enough data. She often reminded me of the ethics of following my research proposal: doing what I said I would do is integral to completing a trustworthy study. Their preparation and Dr. MacGregor's guidance as my dissertation advisor equipped me to complete the daunting task of writing the longest paper of my life.

During our first summer of coursework, we read Bolman and Deal's *Framing Organizations* (2013); since then, I have framed and reframed every problem in my organization through one lens or another. I turn to the structural frame most often, examining role clarification and chain of command. Organizational analysis reveals complexity (Bolman & Deal, 2013). What may appear to be a simple problem evolves into a complicated web of political concerns with a side of human resource issues. The analyst's perspective evolves, too: no longer naive about the organization's true identity, he or she may proceed to data collection with a realistic understanding. The organization central to my dissertation, the foster care system in Missouri, is multifaceted, with government and private agency involvement. It addresses a vast amount of need: an overwhelmingly endless well of broken families. Analyzing this system prior to data

collection enabled a more realistic approach to the topic because the system's complexity reminded me that a foster child's educational attainment is impacted by systemic factors as well as individual ones. Understanding and divulging the challenges of the problems at hand is a tenet of critical hope: "Naïve hope announces that change will come, but it does not divulge how hard it will be, how great the challenges are, or the fact that hope itself is not nearly enough" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). While analyzing the organization revealed its complexity, reviewing the literature grounded the study. Both the organizational analysis and the literature review contextualized the topic.

As I approach the transition from ABD to Ed.D., I have a hard time referring to myself as a scholar. Perhaps that belief comes from my job: I am a generalist, a jack-of-all-trades with broad knowledge of many topics. I have learned that even two years of reading and writing about a single topic only skims the surface of the problem of practice. Perhaps it is more psychological: taking the name "scholar" substantially increases the pressure to fulfill some intangible expectation from the scholarly community. I know for certain my self-perception does not come from a place of criticism of my educational experiences. I highly value the exceptional opportunity afforded me by my family to complete a terminal degree, and I believe the ELPA program and dissertation process is rigorous. I felt the same unshakeable inadequacy in undergraduate and graduate school: all of the knowledge and work did not alter my identity. I entered each program with trepidation and hope that the caterpillar might emerge an expert butterfly; instead, the caterpillar simply discovered in that cocoon how much she does not know. I hoped this was a sign of humility, not insecurity. Servant leadership, my favorite leadership theory, promotes humility as a leadership quality (Northouse, 2016), so that is reassuring.

Through the transformative learning experience called the dissertation, I have come to realize a true scholar does not believe that he or she has reached intellectual superstar status. At the root of scholarly practice is intellectual inquiry (Schultz, 2010), and reflective inquiry requires an attitude opposite of knowing it all. A scholar conducting practitioner research embarks on a "lifelong journey of professional development," conducting research in both formal and informal settings (Heikkinen, de Jong, & Vanderlinde, 2016). The scholar-practitioner contributes to the "body of knowledge for educational practice, generated through a lens of critical inquiry of and within practice" (Schultz, 2010, p. 54).

Schultz (2010) claimed that leading as a scholar-practitioner translates to addressing problems of practice with an ethic of "community, democracy, social justice, caring, and equity" (p. 52). When I view scholarship through that kind of ethical lens and myself as a lifelong learner, the name "scholar" loses its intimidating effect. When I begin topic selection with a real-world problem, I become a problem solver and, on my best days, a world changer (O'Leary, 2005). Humility and confidence are not mutually exclusive. In fact, leading in humility requires the confidence to be transparent: "The leaders that demonstrate integrity are honest with themselves and others, learn from mistakes and are constantly in the process of self-improvement" (Mihelic, Lipicnik, & Tekavcic, 2010, p. 37). Preskill and Brookfield (2009) contended that learning leaders practice openness to every perspective and create opportunities for multiple voices to be heard. The first step is to "stop talking and start listening" (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009, p. 21), which sounds quite a bit like qualitative research.

As I move into the next season, when the letters after my name change from ABD to Ed.D., I anticipate what will change is more about myself and less about the letters after my name. The opportunity to pursue a doctoral degree was a gift, and with any gift comes responsibility. Jesus often spoke about us being held accountable according to our capacity: "If you are given much, much will be required of you. If much is entrusted to you, much will be expected of you" (Luke 12:48, VOICE). I deeply hope my life's work as a scholar-practitioner fulfills the potential of this great gift.

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Appendix A

Organization Recruitment Script

Dear [Name],

My name is Sarah Thornton and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at University of Missouri-Columbia. I am conducting a research study examining how foster parents help foster youth succeed in school, and I am reaching out to you for assistance in identifying participants for the study. Ideal participants are Missouri foster parents who have fostered a minimum of one school-age child or adolescent for one year or more. Each participant will be invited to participate in a series of individual interviews. The interviews and follow-up are anticipated to take no more than four hours. The interview will be audio- or video-recorded. Participation in the study is voluntary. Participants' identities will remain confidential during and after the study. They will be assigned a pseudonym, and all interview notes and recordings will be password-protected and saved to a computer in a locked office. Upon completion of the study, each participant will receive a $25 Visa gift card.

If you have questions or would be willing to email an invitation to participate to foster parents affiliated with your agency, please contact me at 417-860-1978 or srt737@mail.missouri.edu.

Thank you for your participation,

Sarah Thornton
Doctoral Student
University of Missouri-Columbia

Appendix B

Individual Participant Recruitment Script

Dear [Name],

My name is Sarah Thornton and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program at University of Missouri-Columbia. I am conducting a research study examining how foster parents help foster youth succeed in school, and you are invited to participate in the study. If you agree, and your participation is needed, you will be invited to participate in a series of interviews. The interviews and follow-up are anticipated to take no more than four hours. The interviews will be audio- or video-recorded. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study. You will be assigned a pseudonym, and all interview notes and recordings will be password-protected and saved to a computer in a locked office. Upon completion of the study, each participant will receive a $25 Visa gift card. If you have questions or would like to participate, please contact me at 417-860-1978 or srt737@mail.missouri.edu.

Thank you for your participation,

Sarah Thornton
Doctoral Student
University of Missouri-Columbia

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

NAME(S) OF RESEARCHER(S): Sarah Thornton

PROJECT IRB #:

STUDY TITLE: MISSOURI FOSTER PARENTS: ADVOCATING FOR THE EDUCATIONAL NEEDS OF CHILDREN FROM HARD PLACES

This research study is about how foster parents interact with foster youths' education. We are doing this study to learn more about foster parents' experiences and challenges as they advocate for the children in their care.

We invite you to take part in this research study, because you are an experienced foster parent. This consent form tells you why we are doing the study, and what will happen if you join the study.

Please take as much time as you need to read this consent form. You can discuss it with your family, friends, or anyone you choose. If there is anything you do not understand, please ask us to explain. Then you can decide if you want to take part in the study or not.

Research studies help us to answer questions that may improve our understanding of human behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and interactions. Taking part in a research study is voluntary. You are free to say yes or no. We will only include you in this study if you give us your permission first by signing this consent form.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE?

The purpose of this research is to explore foster parents' experiences and challenges helping their foster children succeed in school.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WILL BE IN THIS STUDY?

About 8 to 10 Missouri foster parents will take part in this study.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN IF I TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?

If you agree, you will come to an agreed-upon location in your hometown and/or connect with the researcher using Zoom and respond to a series of interview questions. The researcher will be making audio or video recordings and taking notes. You will also be available for follow-up questions by phone or email. If the interviews take place in person, safety precautions due to COVID-19 will be utilized, in alignment with MU's Behavior Guidance on Returning to Campus Activities During COVID-19 Pandemic Summer/Fall 2020 (https://research.missouri.edu/about/research-restart.php).

HOW LONG WILL I BE IN THE STUDY?

You will be in the study for a total of 3 hours for the interview process during September or October 2020 and 1 hour of follow-up during the following month. The entire study will be over in December 2020.

CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

Yes, you can stop being in the study at any time without giving a reason. Just tell the researcher or study staff right away if you wish to stop taking part.

Also, the researcher may decide to take you off this study at any time, even if you want to stay in the study. The researcher will tell you the reason why you need to stop being in the study. These reasons may be:

1. Your experiences do not align with the research topic.
2. The researcher has completed enough data collection.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. However, the information we learn from you during this study may help us better understand the educational advocacy behaviors of foster parents.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS FROM BEING IN THIS STUDY?

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts for participants in this study. However, you may skip any questions you do not want to answer. If you were to experience distress, we will either reschedule the interview or end your participation in the study.

WHAT OTHER CHOICES DO I HAVE IF I DON'T TAKE PART?

Instead of being in this study, you could refer another Missouri foster parent to take part in the study.

WILL INFORMATION ABOUT ME BE KEPT PRIVATE?

The information we collect about you will be stored in the researcher's electronic/computer or paper files. Computer files are protected with a password and the computer is in a locked office that only study team members can open. Paper files are kept in a locked drawer in a locked office that only study team members can open.

We will give your records a pseudonym and they will not contain your name or other information that could identify you. The pseudonym that connects your name to your information will be kept in a separate, secure location. Information that may identify you may not be given to anyone who is not working on this study without your written consent, or if required by law.

We will do our best to make sure that your personal information from this study is kept private, but we cannot guarantee total privacy. We may give out your personal information if the law requires it. If we publish the results of this study or present them at scientific meetings, we will not use your name or other personal information.

The information we collect from you for this study will not be used or shared with other investigators for future research studies. This applies even if we remove all information that could identify you from your information.

You must give us permission to use the audio and/or video recordings we take of you during the study. You will be able to listen to them before you give your permission for us to use them.

WILL I BE PAID FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

In return for your time and effort, you will be given a $25 Visa gift card upon completion of the study.

WHAT ARE MY RIGHTS AS A STUDY PARTICIPANT?

Taking part in this study is voluntary. If you do decide to take part, you have the right to change your mind and drop out of the study at any time. Whatever your decision, there will be no penalty to you in any way.

We will tell you about any new information discovered during this study that might affect your health, welfare, or change your mind about taking part.

WHO CAN I CALL IF I HAVE QUESTIONS, CONCERNS, OR COMPLAINTS?

If you have more questions about this study at any time, you can call Sarah Thornton at 417-860-1978 or Dr. Cynthia Macgregor at 417-836-6046.

You may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (IRB) if you:

- Have any questions about your rights as a study participant;

- Want to report any problems or complaints; or

- Feel under any pressure to take part or stay in this study.

- The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to make sure the rights of participants are protected. Their phone number is 573-882-3181.

If you want to talk privately about your rights or any issues related to your participation in this study, you can contact University of Missouri Research Participant Advocacy by calling 888-280-5002 (a free call), or emailing MUResearchRPA@missouri.edu.

We will give you a copy of this consent form. Please keep it where you can find it easily. It will help you to remember what we discussed today.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

Consent to Participate in Research
By signing my name below, I confirm the following:

- I have read/had read to me this entire consent form.

- All of my questions were answered to my satisfaction.

- The study's purpose, procedures/activities, potential risks and possible benefits were explained to me.

- I voluntarily agree to take part in this research study. I have been told that I can stop at any time.

Subject's Signature	Date
Signature of Witness (if applicable)*	Date

A witness is required when a participant is competent to provide consent but is blind, or cannot read or write.

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Appendix D

Foster Parent Interview Protocol Draft

Interview 1: Focused Life History

1. When did you know you wanted to be a foster parent?

2. What did the process of becoming a foster parent look like?

3. Describe your initial foster parent training.

4. Did that training include anything about working with schools?

5. Did that training include anything about using a trauma-informed approach, such

    as Trust-Based Relational Intervention?

6. How many foster placements have you had?

7. Describe each child you have fostered. Or, the last ten if you have fostered more

    than ten.

8. About how long did you foster each one?

9. Describe each person currently living in your home.

10. Do any of your foster youth have a CASA worker?

11. A Chafee worker?

12. Describe your Family Support Team.

13. Who else in your life supports you as a foster parent or your foster children?

Interview 2: Details of the Experience

1. Describe the experience of getting _____ (Choose, based on

    information from interview 1) enrolled in school.

2. Did the school assume you have the right to sign paperwork?

3. Describe a time when you began to think your foster youth had some cognitive needs that weren't being addressed. (Awareness)

4. Describe a time when you began to think your foster youth had some social or emotional needs that weren't being addressed. (Awareness)

5. How did you go about finding out about testing or resources your foster youth needed (Seeking information)?

6. How did you go about getting your foster youth the resources they needed (Presenting the case)?

7. How did you go about making sure the foster youth continued to have the resources they needed (Monitoring)?

8. Describe a time when you tried to get your foster youth the resources they needed, but could not overcome the obstacles.

9. Describe a time when you got your foster youth the resources they needed.

Interview 3: Reflection on the Meaning

1. What is your role when it comes to education for your foster youth?

2. What is the Foster Support Team's role in your foster youth's education?

3. What is the school's role in your foster youth's education?

4. Tell me a happy story about the educational experiences of one of your foster youth.

5. Tell me a disappointing story about the educational experiences of one of your foster youth.

6. In your opinion, what keeps foster youth from graduating from high school?

7. In your opinion, what keeps foster youth from going to college?

8. How does a foster youth's trauma impact his or her education?

9. Is there anything else I need to know?

VITA

Sarah Thornton is a native of Springfield, Missouri. She is a higher education administrator, instructor, and academic advisor in the adult education division at Drury University. She previously taught high school math and college writing. She earned a Bachelor of Science in Middle School Education from Southwest Baptist University in 2001 and a Master of Arts in Writing from Missouri State University in 2006. She and her husband, Andy, have adopted four precious children, a beagle named Norbit, and eight chickens. They enjoy spending time with their family, friends, and church family; completing home improvement projects on their 150-year-old house, and cooking delicious meals together. Upon completion of her terminal degree, she looks forward to exploring new professional challenges and creative outlets.