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Lynda Marie Bonneau  
School Experiences of Foster  
Children as Seen Through the  
Eyes of Teachers

## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the school experiences of foster children by asking their teachers how they perceive them academically, socially and behaviorally. Foster children, who have generally experienced adverse life circumstances, are prone to have academic and behavioral trouble in school; many drop out before completing high school. This research focused on assessing how teachers cope with the unique challenges these students present, their suggestions for how they could be supported in school, and recommendations in terms of teacher training for working with this group.

Eight public school teachers of foster children from two urban schools in Rhode Island were interviewed, including one special education teacher from a charter elementary school and seven from an alternative public high school. All participants taught a foster child within the last two years. The high school teachers were familiar with their student's academic and personal lives, teaching them in small classes for four years.

All the teachers were motivated to understand and support the children's needs. They reported many students' difficulties with academic work and social functioning. Some foster children responded positively to the teacher's help and support, which was validating for teachers, although often draining, while other children remained unresponsive, which was often experienced as the teacher's personal failure.

School structure, including individualized learning that encompassed the social-emotional needs of foster children, including internships for high school students, was outlined as an effective strategy. Teachers also need strong support in the school system and to have access to appropriate resources.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES OF FOSTER CHILDREN AS SEEN THROUGH THE  
EYES OF TEACHERS

A project based upon an independent investigation,  
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Social Work

Lynda Marie Bonneau

Smith College School of Social Work  
Northampton, MA 01063

2008

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

This study focuses on foster children in the context of school, in order to gain insight into the classroom experiences of this vulnerable group of children. Eight school teachers of foster children have been interviewed to gain their perceptions and insights into the children's academic, social, and behavioral functioning. Also explored were the ways in which the teachers coped with and processed the unique challenges presented by these children.

As of 2004, 518,000 children in the United States were estimated to reside in foster care (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 2004); they are considered one of the most vulnerable populations of students, having experienced many adverse life circumstances, including the loss of their birth families, homes, and neighborhoods. Additionally, many have trauma histories and more serious emotional problems than noted in the past. They are considerably more likely than other children to have academic and behavioral trouble in school, and are twice as likely to drop out before completing high school, putting them at greater risk of becoming part of the public assistance and criminal justice systems (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

A large body of knowledge exists on the academic and behavioral difficulties experienced by foster children as well as the ameliorative efforts found within the educational system (Altshuler, 2003; Blome, 1997; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003; Geroski & Knauss, 2000; Gustavsson, 1991; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Zetlin, Weinberg, &

Kimm, 2003; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm, 2005). While many researchers have formulated ways for school personnel to mitigate the barriers faced by foster children within the educational system, the drop-out rate of foster children and youth has continued unabated (US Department of Education, 2001). While the US has the resources and technical capacity to deliver high-quality education that could accommodate the often extensive needs of foster children, to date, the majority of public systems “have chosen not to focus attention or energy on doing so” (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 922).

Current research tends to focus primarily on school social workers as meeting the many needs of foster children while downplaying the significance of teachers within the equation (Gustavsson, 1991; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2007; Zetlin et al., 2005). The reality is that students spend approximately 30 + hours a week in school, and the younger the children are, the more time they will spend with one individual teacher. Given the unique position of classroom teachers to serve as positive attachment figures for foster children, while potentially enhancing their social and educational growth, it is vital to understand how teachers process the school experiences of this vulnerable population.

Before pursuing a career in social work, I was employed as a preschool teacher for almost two years. While working with four different foster children during this time, the roller coaster relationship I forged with the first child, Tom, was a poignant experience that served as the catalyst in my career change. Tom was a smart and vivacious 4-year-old who, although well-liked by his classmates, was very rough with them. He had extreme difficulty sitting quietly, and would frequently engage in self-injurious behavior. Ultimately the school decided to expel him.

I was increasingly frustrated and overwhelmed as my futile attempts to contain him failed; I felt as though I had to choose between the welfare of my class versus the welfare of this student. New to the world of teaching, I did not have the skill set or the staff support to successfully educate Tom. My subsequent encounters with other foster children who were also expelled because of behavioral issues left me with more questions than answers. This experience was decisive in my choice of social work as a career, and now in my choice to focus my thesis on teachers' experiences and perceptions with this population.

This resulting exploratory study was conducted by interviewing a sample of eight school teachers who work with students in foster care in Rhode Island. The purpose of the study was to determine how these professionals perceive their foster students and to assess how these perceptions might impact their work with foster children. The operational definition for the phrase *foster child* is, for the purpose of this study, any school-aged child or youth, who was removed from home, placed in DCYF custody, and is living in a foster home or group home.

The selection of the subjects and the interview procedures are discussed in Chapter III on Methodology, the findings are discussed in Chapter IV, and the discussion of the major findings and conclusion of this study are presented in Chapter V. Current trends in child welfare, the psychological impact of foster care and its relationship to school performance, teachers' perceptions of children with behavioral difficulties, and attachment theory and resilience are subjects addressed next, in Chapter II, the Literature Review.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *Introduction*

This exploratory study focuses on the school experiences of foster children, as perceived by their teachers. This chapter presents a review of the literature relating to the psychosocial problems faced by foster children, how this interrelates with their life at school, and the role of teachers and schools in fostering their development. The urgency of serious school problems faced by foster children is stressed by Black (2006), who cites the observation that their "problems are 'real and dire'. But school officials and teachers seldom understand the plight of foster children...and if they did—and if they took action to help—foster kids would 'have a better chance for a rewarding life'" (p.52).

This review discusses eight pertinent issues, starting with previous research related to the challenges faced by foster children within the educational system; the role of school personnel in addressing these issues; and the current demographic picture of the population of foster children.

The second section examines the psychological consequences of being in foster care and how they impact school performance. Teachers' perceptions of children with behavioral difficulties are discussed in the third section, followed, in the fourth section, by a presentation of attachment theory as it relates to the teacher/child dyad. The fifth section explores the development of resilience in some foster children. Collaborative efforts between school social workers and teachers in meeting the needs of foster children

is the subject of the seventh section and existing school initiatives that appear promising in increasing the academic achievement for foster children are presented. The chapter ends with a discussion relating the existing body of knowledge to this current investigation of teacher perceptions of school experiences of the foster children in their classrooms.

#### *Current Demographic Picture of the Population of Foster Children*

The majority of children in foster care have historically come from poor, minority families, with African-American children being consistently over-represented in this population (Zetlin et al., 2005). Of the half million children in foster care in 2004, 34% were African American, 18% were Hispanic, and 2% were American Indian/Alaskan Natives (CWLA, 2004). These percentages are generally disproportionate to their numbers in the United States population: African Americans represent 15% of the population, Hispanics represent 17%, and American Indian/Alaskan Natives represent 1% of the population. It is noteworthy, for example, that white children represent 40% of the total foster care population, while they represent 61% of the general population.

Another discrepancy found when analyzing the child welfare data is that “African-American children and youth are significantly more likely to be removed from their homes than their white counterparts when abuse or neglect is found; and once removed, stay in out-of-home placements far longer—in some states two to three times longer” (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 918). Interestingly, while there are more children of color in the foster care system than in the general United States population, child abuse and neglect occur at approximately the same rate in all racial and ethnic groups (CWLA, 2004).

The average age of children entering foster care has fluctuated throughout the previous decades. In 1982 their average age was 12.6 as compared to 1992 when the mean was 7.8 (Solomon, 1996). As of 2004, the average age has continued to increase with 10.1 being the current average age of children entering foster care for the first time. Nationwide, the number of children in foster care, according to age, is as follows: 5% younger than 1, 25% between the ages of 1 and 5, 20% between 6 and 10, 29% between 11 and 15, 18% between 16 and 18, and 2% over the age of 18 (CWLA, 2004). Fifty-three percent of the children are male, while forty-seven percent are female. As these statistics demonstrate, 67% of the foster care population are school-age children and youth. This study focuses on this group, and includes seven high school teachers and one elementary school teacher.

#### *Psychological Consequences of Being in Foster Care and School Performance*

Children generally experience intense feelings of loss when removed from their homes, regardless of how bad their situation is (Solomon, 1996); losing their families also means losing their feelings of stability, security, sense of belonging, their daily routines, and their communities. They are often troubled with anxieties such as wondering how long they will be in foster care, when they will leave, and where they will ultimately live. These questions inevitably affect a child's ability to cope, perform, make attachments, and anticipate the future (Molin, 1990).

Foster children have generally lived through an initial trauma (or multiple traumas) leading to their placement, such as experiencing parental illness or death, neglect, maltreatment and/or abandonment. As children are separated from their biological parents, they experience a "second trauma" in which they are likely to

experience “a wide array of feelings including loss, abandonment, isolation, fear, conflict, ambivalence, rejection, humiliation, helplessness, anxiety, and depression” (Geroski & Knauss, 2000, p. 153). The trauma of separation is exacerbated for maltreated children, with detrimental psychological consequences including greater likelihood of developing low self-esteem, sad affect, and a damaged sense of self-worth and self-image (Clausen, Landsverk, Ganger, Chadwick, & Litrownik, 1998; Geroski & Knauss; Gustavsson, 1991). As compared to foster children who have not been maltreated, abused foster children demonstrate weaker cognitive abilities and lower academic achievement and classroom performance (Altshuler, 2003).

An extensive body of knowledge exists which supports “...a relationship between maltreatment and negative development and psychological outcomes as the child grows from infancy through adolescence” (Gustavsson, 1991, p. 225). The behavioral expressions of maltreated children in school settings range from “...aggressive, demanding, immature, and attention seeking behaviors to withdrawn, anxious, and over-compliant behaviors” (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 918). These symptoms create barriers for children both socially and academically because they are unable to effectively engage with their peers, their teachers, and/or the material being taught in school.

As a group, foster children in school, “...have higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals; 75% perform below grade level and more than 50% have been retained at least 1 year in school” (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 918). They also consistently earn lower grades than non-foster youth in reading and mathematics, and score lower on standardized tests in these subjects (Zetlin & Weinberg). Consequently, foster youth are disproportionately represented in special education services: “...whereas

10% of the general population receives special education services, 25-52% of children in foster care are placed in special education” (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 918).

Compounding the challenges faced by foster children and youth are high levels of residential mobility and school transfers. As foster children get shuffled around from placement to placement, their educational records frequently become incomplete due to missing transcripts, assessments and attendance data. With the transfer of school records often delayed, foster children miss school, creating further educational gaps (Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). This has dire consequences for all foster children, especially those with special needs as their special education services, such as IEPs (Individualized Education Plan), are often neglected or not implemented until months later (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

Another factor contributing to the school performance of foster children concerns the attitudes of teachers. Being in foster care affects both the way students behave in school and the reactions they elicit from educators (Altshuler, 2003). As Emerson and Lovitt (2003) contend, “Some teachers are unaware of or insensitive to their [foster children’s] problems and do not offer proper encouragement” (p. 200). This may further degrade the self-esteem of foster children as well as increase their feelings of isolation, making it even harder for them to absorb information and positively interact with their peers.

In addition, foster children must also contend with a school social environment that is often shaped by educational practices laden with intentional and unintentional biases with respect to race, socioeconomic status, gender, home environment, and peer group relationships. These biases disenfranchise foster youth; they “...report that when

their living arrangements and legal status are known, this knowledge can result in subtle and not-so-subtle prejudice” (Anderson & Seita, 2006, p. 82). With an overrepresentation of minority children in the child welfare system, foster youth are left to contend with institutional forces such as racism and oppression without a safety net, leaving them further disempowered (Anderson & Seita).

Although it would be enlightening to have in-depth biopsychosocial reports of the children discussed in this study, including background information relating to their biological families, as well as reasons for placement, and history of their foster placements, this is not within the scope of this research. Furthermore, we cannot assume that all foster children will present emotional problems and dysfunctional behaviors, and that teachers will have negative interactions with them. This study explores the range of children's emotional, social and educational adaptations, as perceived by their teachers, as well as the teachers' perceptions of their interactions with these students.

#### *Teachers' Perceptions of Children with Behavioral Issues*

Psychoanalyst researchers and mental health educators have cited two plausible causes for a child's disruptive behavior. The first stems from a poor attachment between a child and his or her primary caregiver and familial environment. The second posits that disruptive behaviors, which are significant enough to affect a person's ability to function, are disorders that are biological in nature (Allen, 2003, p. 6). Regardless of the underpinnings of the behavior, children who act out generally receive negative attention, which often leads to an internalization of the belief that they are “bad” or “stupid” (Allen). Unfortunately, this belief is often reinforced as their behavior elicits negative

responses from the adults in their lives such as teachers; children who exhibit disruptive behaviors are often acting-out a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It has been observed that in classrooms, "students who have disruptive behaviors are sometimes dealt with by being yelled at, given time-out, sent out of the room, suspended, or expelled from school, and finally placed in special education classrooms" (Allen, 2003, p. 2). This reaction can establish a cycle of negative interactions in which teachers and students become locked in a battle of wills. This pattern often deprives the child of a strong sense of self-esteem while simultaneously draining a teacher's feeling of competency.

Birch and Ladd (1998) have noted "that children's behaviors affect the relationships that they form with teachers, and the relationships that children form with teachers affect their subsequent behavioral adjustment" (p. 934). Teachers, therefore, may react in response to a child's interpersonal behaviors, causing a damaging cyclical pattern of relating that negatively impacts those children who exhibit "dependent" and "conflictual" behavior.

Birch and Ladd (1997) define dependency as "possessive and 'clingy' child behaviors that are indicative of an over-reliance on the teacher as a source of support" (p.63), while characterizing a conflictual teacher-child relationship as "discordant interactions and a lack of rapport between the teacher and the child" (p. 63). Building on prior research (Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Pianta & Stienberg, 1992), Birch and Ladd (1998) found that teachers report having closer relationships with those children whom they perceive as independent and possessing positive attitudes towards school. In contrast, children who are perceived as being oppositional or over-reliant on the teacher

for emotional and academic support are viewed as disliking school; this view negatively impacts teachers' feelings about such children's school readiness, motivation, and ability.

In further exploring the quality of teacher-child relationships, there is an abundance of research supporting that,

...whereas close teacher-child relationships are associated with positive child outcomes, such as school liking, classroom participation, and academic competence, conflictual teacher-child relationships are linked with negative outcomes, such as unfavorable school attitudes, school avoidance, classroom disengagement, and poor academic performance (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Taylor & Machida, 1996, as cited in Birch & Ladd, 1998, p. 935).

The teacher-child dyad is important to consider because positive relationships can serve an ameliorative function; they can protect against poor school performance associated with unsupportive home environments (Hamre & Pianta, 2001, p. 626).

Resnick et al.'s (1998) survey data indicates that, "...even in adolescence, relationships with teachers are one of the single most common resources for children and may operate as a protective factor against risk for a range of problem outcomes" (as cited in Hamre & Pianta, p. 626).

In summation, the often traumatic and unstable backgrounds of foster children can contribute to their ongoing psychological, social and educational problems. Teachers are in a pivotal role with these children, as they have the potential to foster self esteem, social skills, and improved learning. They also have the difficult problem of relating to children who may be disruptive to a classroom, and although needing attention and warmth, may rebel against the teachers' efforts to reach out to them with emotional support. This study provides the opportunity to learn of the teachers' observations of the educational,

behavioral and social adaptation of these children in the classroom, and to understand the teachers' interactions with them.

*The Implications of Attachment Theory as it Relates to Foster Children*

Attachment theory is useful to understand when working with foster children as many of them enter the system without having experienced a secure attachment within their family of origin, thus impairing their overall development. Attachment theory posits that a central task of infancy is forming an attachment to the mother or primary caregiver. Bowlby described attachment as a fundamental need that is biologically rooted. Early life experiences, particularly with a primary caregiver, create a child's concept of self and others. These representations tend to persist over time and guide children's relationship behaviors throughout life unless remediated (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). Mennen and O'Keefe state that there is now "...sufficient evidence suggesting that a child's early experiences can be overcome if therapeutic intervention takes place and emotional stability and security is provided" (Clarke & Clarke, 1999; Messer, 1999, as cited in Mennen & O'Keefe, p. 581).

Expanding on Bowlby's theory, Ainsworth and Main (Davies, 2004) have identified four attachment styles based on infants' behavior when reunited with their mothers after a brief separation. These styles represent secure attachment and three types of insecure patterns of attachment: anxious/ambivalent, anxious/avoidant, and disoriented/disorganized (Davies). Children with secure attachments demonstrate cooperative behavior in their interpersonal relationships, even under stress; children with insecure attachments display various symptoms of insecurity and anxiety.

When children with anxious/ambivalent attachments are distressed, they often display both dependent and hostile behavior. This pattern results when a child's parent is inconsistent or attempts to control the child through threats of abandonment. Children with anxious/avoidant attachments distrust their caregivers and have little hope that they will be responded to when needed. Being distant from caregivers during times of stress is this child's way of defending him or herself against parental rejection or unresponsiveness. Those children with disoriented/disorganized patterns of attachment exhibit both behavioral disorientation and approach/avoidance behavior. This style of attachment occurs when a caregiver creates fear in an infant, due to maltreatment, and/or other disturbed parental mental states and behaviors.

These different behavioral patterns enable children to cope with and survive in their caregiving environment, and while they may be functional in the parent/child dyad, they are dysfunctional in other social environments such as school (Davies, 2004; Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005). Within the school setting, children who have developed insecure attachments "...are at risk for lower social competence and self-esteem. They tend to show elevated levels of aggressive and hostile behavior, and in a pre-school setting elicited less contact and more anger from preschool teachers than did securely attached children" (Cohn, 1990; Stroufe, 1983; Stroufe, 1988, as cited in Hamre & Pianta, 2001, p. 625). For foster children, a large percentage of whom have attachment issues, the quality of the emotional connection between adults and children in elementary schools becomes an important variable in their school performance and associated outcomes.

Understanding attachment styles can help teachers and mental health professionals comprehend the intensity of attachment needs, as well as the child's need to repeat dysfunctional attachment styles. To reach out to a child with sympathy and a wish to help, only to be met by rejection and hostility, can be difficult for a teacher or therapist to tolerate. This study focuses on teachers' perceptions of their children's reciprocal interpersonal behaviors with them and with their classmates. It also offers the opportunity to learn about teachers' experiences, struggles, strategies, and insights in working with foster children.

### *Resiliency among Foster Children*

While extensive research has identified primarily negative outcomes for foster youth, not all foster children have been maltreated, and many who have experienced maltreatment and been placed in foster homes have not evidenced developmental disruption (Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). Resilience, which is commonly defined as "the process by which individuals achieve adaptive functioning in the face of adversity" (Hines et al., p. 381) is an important concept to examine when exploring the vast continuum of experiences and outcomes of foster youth; those factors that augment positive outcomes despite risk, "...encompass multiple systems in dynamic interaction as they influence and are influenced by individual development" (Hines et al., p. 382). As such, resilience is no longer viewed as a fixed trait, but rather something that can be enhanced through a variety of environmental influences (Schofield & Beek, 2005).

Furthermore, both foster homes and schools can serve as protective factors in the development of resilience. For example, interviews with 14 former foster youth who are currently attending a four year university suggest that "both the educational and the foster

care systems functioned as 'safe havens' and places of refuge and escape. In addition, these systems provided new opportunities for educational achievement and the chance to create new relationships with adults and peers" (Hines et al., 2005, p. 392).

While many researchers view school as a potential place to build resilience in children, it could also increase their vulnerability. According to Arrington and Wilson (2000), "Environments can make youth vulnerable because social resources are lacking, stress is high and institutions are not supported" (p. 224). When schools are not adequately funded or when teachers are not properly supported, their ability to build resilience in at-risk youth is decreased.

This study is designed to explore both the problems and the strengths and resilience existing in the foster children under discussion. It also examines the strengths, and creativity teachers display in working with these children, as well their frustrations and problems. We were not limited by much of the existing literature, which reports negative outcomes and negative behaviors on the part of foster children, and the general inability of teachers and schools to cope with these children and the problems they present. The design of our open-ended questions lends themselves to an unbiased exploration of teachers' perceptions of the foster children in their classrooms, and their efforts on their behalf.

#### *Collaboration between School Social Workers and Teachers*

Many teachers and school systems often find themselves with inadequate resources, and budget cuts; the recently increased emphasis on accountability and performance scores due to the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, has increased teacher stress (Anderson & Seita, 2006). This stress is often compounded by

overcrowded classrooms, lack of support from administrators, day-to-day teaching concerns, lack of resources and time constraints (Lynn, McKay, & Atkins, 2003, p. 199). Focusing on foster children, the authors did not emphasize the teachers and their feelings of comfort, discomfort, support and stress within the school system. However, questions can also be raised about whether help was available to them within the school system to deal with the needs of foster children, whether they felt that they might have benefited from an orientation to working with foster children, and children with emotional and/or educational problems.

The suggested role of school social workers in relation to foster children has been defined as providing consultation to classroom teachers, acting as a liaison between child welfare agencies and the school system, advocating for the foster child, and facilitating interventions such as a social skills group (Arons & Schwartz, 1993; Geroski & Knauss, 2000; Gustavsson, 1991; Zetlin et al., 2003); however, the extent to which these tasks are fulfilled in many schools is questionable.

The reality of the public schools, especially in urban and low-income communities, is that their social workers often have extremely large caseloads. Furthermore, in order to receive desperately needed funds, NCLB legislation requires states to adopt a “zero-tolerance policy” for violent or persistently disruptive students. As a result, teachers are essentially empowered to remove these students from the classroom. To ameliorate this reality, collaboration becomes necessary.

In this study, teachers are asked if [and how] they are involved with school social workers, as well as other agencies. Teachers experiences [if any] with school social workers, child welfare or other agencies on behalf of foster children are also explored.

In one study examining the barriers and successful practices identified by three groups of participants (students, educators, and caseworkers) that affect the school performance of students living in foster care, Altshuler (2003) found that “few mechanisms exist to support successful collaboration between public schools and child welfare agencies. One unfortunate consequence is that the children ostensibly being served by either system often ended up receiving inadequate services from both systems” (p.52). Although this is a critical issue, exploring the school's relationship with child welfare agencies was beyond the scope of this study; however, whether individual teachers had contact with child welfare or other agencies on behalf of their students was discussed.

#### *Promising Programs*

Although the general view about foster children in the educational system is pessimistic, there have been special demonstration projects that have been successful; many foster children successfully navigate their way through the educational system with the proper supports (Casey Family Foundation, 2003). According to an extensive longitudinal study conducted by the Casey Family Foundation, the following factors were highlighted as being predictive of successful outcomes: educational attainment, relationship satisfaction, ability to earn income, and mental and physical health.

Those factors specific to the educational realm are: 1) life skills preparation; 2) completing a high school diploma or GED before leaving care; 3) minimized academic problems; 4) participation in clubs and organizations for youth while in foster care; and 5) scholarships for college or job training (Casey Family Foundation, 2003). In short,

programs aimed at supporting foster children to achieve success academically and gain mastery over their lives are proven to be effective interventions.

When children are taken from their families of origin, it is not uncommon for them to switch school systems as well. One major consequence of this added disruption is that educational files are not systematically tracked. The new school system is therefore unaware of testing results and potential special needs services, and can often misinterpret behavior because of a lack of information. One piece of legislation designed to address this problem requires educational passports to accompany all children. This passport contains vital information about school placement, attendance, academic achievement, and IEP goals, services, and progress reports (Zetlin et al., 2003).

Even though legislation mandates that files are kept up-to-date, this is not always the case as Child Welfare caseworkers are frequently overburdened. As such, it is important for teachers to play an active role in communicating with the child welfare agency to ensure that they receive the educational passport and add to it as needed. Information about the educational passport was not included in this study; however if references to passports are made spontaneously by teachers, such as in reference to recommendations they make or when they talk about how they learned their student were foster children, their observations and comments are included.

Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) highlight three promising programs to help youth in foster care remain supported and engaged in school. One such program is the Treehouse Tutoring Program in Seattle, Washington, which was initiated in a number of elementary schools serving foster children. The tutors are located in the school and meet with students, referred by the state social workers, on a daily basis. They also meet regularly

with teachers to set goals both behaviorally and academically for the students, while also educating the teachers about each child's foster status and unique needs (Zetlin & Weinberg). This program provides a unique individual experience for a foster child desperately in need of strong adult figures, and provides teachers with an invaluable support system. It also educates teachers about the effect of the foster children's experiences related to their biological families, and their history in foster homes, on their emotional state, development, and their associated behaviors.

In California, the Foster Youth Service (FYS) is another program which specifically addresses the educational and emotional needs of foster children living in group homes. The high priority for FYS is tracking school records, IEP documents, immunization records, and school credits. In addition, FYS offers individualized tutoring one to two times weekly. FYS serves as a liaison between schools and Child Welfare agencies to ensure that foster children are not lost in the system (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

Los Angeles County has launched its own Education Initiative program to further ensure that child welfare agencies focus more attention on foster children's schooling and educational needs. The Initiative has created the position of an educational specialist to serve as an advocate for foster children experiencing educational problems. The education specialists work in partnership with child welfare social workers. When a worker identifies school problems, an education specialist works with the school district to secure effective educational programs and services for the foster child. The specialists also provide regular training for social workers to increase their awareness of educational problems and needs that foster children experience (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

It is possible that teachers within the Rhode Island school system have access to special programs like these demonstration projects, or are involved in unique programs within their own schools or within their school system. Interview questions concerning teachers' involvement with school social workers, and child welfare and other interested agencies may lead to further exploration of this issue.

### *Summary*

Foster children generally experience many adverse life circumstances, including the loss of their birth families, homes, and neighborhoods; many have trauma histories, and more serious emotional problems than noted in the past. Given the large representation of racial minorities within the foster care population, issues of racism often compound their problems. Facing multiple stresses, including the multiplicity of foster homes they often encounter, foster children tend to have difficulties adapting to school, which can be exacerbated by learning challenges. Because school plays such a prominent role in the lives and development of all children, it is important to focus attention on the experiences of foster children in the public school system, which is the goal of this study.

Teachers can potentially be positive role models for their students, and help them adapt to school, both educationally and socially. There are many reports in the literature indicating that teachers often have difficulty helping foster children in their class, due to a combination of various organizational stressors (such as overcrowded classrooms), and lack of training in coping with the emotional and special education needs of these children.

However, this exploratory study focuses on talking to individual teachers, and understanding from them directly how they perceive these children and their problems

and strengths, and the ways in which teachers cope and are successful with them, as well as ways in which they may feel they (as well as the children) need additional help and support.

Research related to school problems of foster children tends to primarily focus on services provided by school social workers, while neglecting the children's daily experiences in the classroom. However, the role of school in the lives of foster children has been receiving increased attention, and positive school experiences (including relationships with teachers and peers) are seen as promoting resilience. In focusing on foster children as seen through the eyes of their teachers, this study explores how foster children experience the educational system, as well as how teachers cope with and understand the unique challenges presented by these children. This research is intended to deepen the awareness of how educators, and social workers through collaborative efforts, can help foster children increase their resiliency and enhance their future academic, personal, and social development.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### *Study Purpose and Question*

This study focuses on foster children in Rhode Island as seen through the eyes of their teachers in order to gain insight into the range of their classroom experiences, including their academic, social, and behavioral functioning. Additionally, this study explores how teachers cope with and process the unique challenges presented by these children, and the strategies they have developed to deal with this vulnerable population.

Semi-structured interviews were held with eight teachers of foster children, encompassing grades 3-12. The interactions of foster children with their peers was explored, including the awareness (and reactions) of other children to the children's foster care status; questions were also raised regarding the academic, social, and emotional behavior patterns of these foster children. Teachers were asked about the nature of their parent-teacher conferences concerning foster children, whether foster parents and/or biological parents attended, and whether these differed from conferences with parents of non-foster children.

Teachers were also asked about their own impressions and reactions to foster children, in terms of special satisfactions and challenges they experienced, whether they developed any strategies they felt were effective in their work with them, and whether they had any recommendations in terms of teacher training for working with this group, and for ways in which these children could be supported in school.

The full questionnaire is found in Appendix A.

### *Research Methods and Design*

An exploratory qualitative research study with flexible methods was utilized in order to gather rich narrative data from teachers who had direct contact with foster children, with a focus on their perspectives and insights; they were in the unique position of being able to observe these students on a day-to-day basis in a variety of contexts. According to Anastas (1999), flexible method research is about “collecting data, ‘people’s own words and behavior,’ in order to understand on a personal level the meanings, ‘motives and beliefs behind people’s actions” (p. 57). It was anticipated that their responses would provide invaluable information regarding the special issues these children and their teachers might be facing in school, how both groups were adapting, and how both teachers and children could be better supported in the future.

### *Sample*

The recruitment process was conducted using a non-probability snowball sample of convenience. Initially I asked one person, who was a high school administrator, to help me recruit subjects because of her extensive contact with elementary school teachers in several schools. I anticipated that when I received a list of interested participants from this referral source, I would send each person a letter of invitation (see Appendix B), indicating that I would be calling them in the next few days to discuss my project, their eligibility, and formally ask for their participation (see Appendix C).

There were two major criteria for inclusion of subjects: 1) participating teachers must have worked with a foster child in a public or charter school classroom setting within the last two years; and 2) participants needed to have primary responsibility for

one class and be with that class most of the day. Participants, additionally, needed to speak, read, and write English; there were no limitations as to gender, race, ethnicity, or religion.

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Committee in December of 2007 (see Appendix D), I reconnected with my referral source to further discuss the recruitment process. She indicated that she would not have the time to make recruitment phone calls and suggested that I provide her with a flyer briefly describing my study and participation requirements (see Appendix E), which she could then include in an e-mail to prospective subjects. Her rationale was that this would be a more effective and less time-consuming approach than phoning teachers individually.

After I gave her a flyer and waited for a couple of weeks, without receiving any responses, I then opted to increase the number of my referral sources. I contacted ten people who worked in either the educational field or mental health profession. Of these ten individuals, five suggested possible subjects whom they then personally contacted; I e-mailed them the flyer and then waited another couple of weeks. During this time the three individuals who responded did not fit the criteria or knew of anybody who did. One elementary school principal, whom I contacted directly, did not respond after several phone calls.

Only one elementary school teacher met participation criteria, and participated; she subsequently referred me to three other elementary school teachers who fit participation criteria, but declined to participate due to heavy work loads.

After finding only one elementary school teacher to participate in my study, I opted to broaden my search criteria to include high school teachers. One of my new

referral sources, a high school teacher, sent out a mass e-mail to his entire school and spoke with them in person as well; another referral source, also a high school teacher, personally asked a number of his colleagues if they would be willing to participate. Eight teachers responded via e-mail; five met participation criteria; the last two subjects were referred by two of the participating subjects.

The criteria for inclusion remained the same: although, most high school teachers would not fit the second criterion for eligibility, that is, having primary responsibility for one class and be with that class most of the day, the subjects recruited taught in a non-traditional public high school where they work with one group of students for four years and are responsible for all aspects of their learning. Additionally, given the school's strong emphasis on family involvement and collaboration, teachers are aware of the psychosocial issues of each student. Given the intimate structure of this particular school, (with a low teacher-to-student ration of 1 to 15), it was assumed that these teachers would have insight into the day-to-day lives of their students.

My sample was composed of 7 high school teachers and one elementary school teacher. The response rate was high from the high school teachers, which I attribute to their interest in the subject as well as the personal connection that was made by two of my referral sources who work in the same school as these teachers; not only did they e-mail their contacts but they spoke with them in person as well. After conducting the interviews with this highly motivated group, it seemed as though participants were interested in understanding in greater depth of their experiences in working with a foster child.

The original intent was to interview 12 subjects; however due to the problem I encountered in recruiting subjects, and the time constraints for completing this thesis, 8 subjects were interviewed.

Retrospectively it appeared that e-mailing potential participants was not a reliable approach as no personal contact was made by the referral source which deterred participation; subjects responded when personal contact was made, (sometimes in addition to using e-mails). In this regard it is significant that the one elementary school teacher who participated was personally contacted by a referral source; she indicated that she had previously received an e-mail from another referral source but had neglected to respond earlier, due to the heavy volume of e-mails she receives on a daily basis.

#### *Description of Subjects*

The sample included eight teachers from two urban schools; one was from a charter elementary school and seven were from an alternative public high school. Seven participants reported teaching a regular education class while one reported teaching a special education class for children.

Of the participants in this study, three were men and five were women, ranging in age from 27 to 48. Seven participants identified themselves as Caucasian while one participant identified as Black, Dominican, and Native American.

The group of high school teachers enlisted in this study was an unusual group based on the structure of the school; while the students attending this school were similar to those attending other public high schools, the subjects were different as they had more exposure to their student's academic and personal lives, as they taught each group of students for four years. While this was a college preparatory high school, the focus of this

school was to individualize each student's learning plan while basing their learning in real world experiences via community based internships.

The elementary school teacher's experience was also unique as she taught in a special education class for emotionally disturbed children.

### *Data Collection*

I developed a semi-structured interview guide in consultation with my thesis advisor in the fall of 2007, which I submitted, together with my Thesis Proposal to the Smith College School of Social Work Human Subject Review Board, and received their approval for my study on December 18, 2007. Two additional amendments were later submitted to the Review Board: one seeking approval for the flyer to be sent to teachers by the referral sources, which was approved on February 14, 2008; and one requesting permission to extend the subject pool to high school teachers, was approved on March 26, 2008.

Prior to the study, I did a pilot interview with one volunteer who was not a part of the study. The feedback elicited through this process helped me prepare and plan for the interviews.

Conducting a semi-structured interview allowed me to ask guiding questions to extract thematic information, while also keeping the questions open-ended enough so that respondents could freely discuss their own individual experiences, reactions, and responses. An added benefit was my ability to ask clarifying questions, thereby decreasing the possibility of misunderstanding or misinterpreting participants' responses.

I contacted my first referral source in January of 2008 in order to gather a list of potential subjects. When discussing my anticipated recruitment procedure with her, she

indicated that she preferred e-mailing potential participants as opposed to giving me their contact information or calling them; she suggested I provide a flyer as an attachment. I was unable to recruit subjects through this procedure, and was able to obtain only one participant through contact with 10 other referral sources. I broadened my criteria on March 26, 2008 to include high school teachers, which was a successful approach. The interviews took place from March 29, 2008 until April 10, 2008.

Prior to the interviews all subjects received an e-mail from the referral source with the flyer attached, which included my contact information; I initiated contact with the elementary school teacher after being given her e-mail address by my referral source who personally contacted her. Once teachers responded to this e-mail I confirmed their eligibility to participate and then scheduled a convenient date, time, and location for the 60-minute face-to-face interview. Prior to the official interview I e-mailed each participant a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix F) and informed them about the use of tape recording and note taking during the interview. After the interview I asked each participant if they knew of other teachers who might be willing to participate in my study.

Given the difficulty of finding participants, the study would have been stronger if I had been able to the quota of interviewing 12-15 subjects.

#### *Data Analysis*

The interviews, which were tape recorded, were completed on April 10, 2008. Before analyzing the data I listened to the tape recorded interviews, which allowed me to hear how the teachers explained and interpreted the classroom experiences of their foster

students'. I also learned what services, resources, and training teachers believed would help them better serve this population of students.

After listening to the tapes, I chose and then transcribed selected portions. Through the process of content analysis, involving developing a basic coding system, the participants' responses were categorized by themes and unique ideas. The analysis of the major data findings is reported in the findings section of the thesis.

Reliability issues were addressed in a number of ways; first, the questionnaire was developed to avoid bias, and was pre-tested. To promote consistency, each interview participant was asked all questions on the questionnaire, and the data was analyzed by responses to each question. Listening to the interview tapes after the interview experience itself also allowed for a more objective and reliable stance.

The subjectivity of the interviewer also affects reliability, and is of critical importance in qualitative research; it was crucial for me to monitor my own subjective (verbal and non-verbal) reactions during the interview, such as asking unbiased questions, and being non-judgmental in my responses, so that I could prevent my feelings and attitudes from impacting my data and results (Anastas, 1999). One aid in doing this was utilizing a journal log to record and manage my personal biases so that I did not include my personal thoughts with the data I obtained from the teachers.

I took care to ensure confidentiality of study participants by using pseudonyms rather than real names to label the interview notes and/or cassette tapes. Additionally, I did not use identifying information to describe individuals, but instead combined collective data to reflect the subject pool in the aggregate. As such, the study participants

were not identifiable in the final report. Any other names or sensitive information about specific individuals was treated in a disguised and confidential manner.

In accordance with federal regulations, I locked informed consent forms, interview notes, and cassette tapes in a file drawer during the thesis process and will continue to do so for the next three years. Informed consents were kept separate from the other materials. I will destroy all confidential material after three years. To further insure confidentiality, my research advisor had access to the data only after the identifying information had been removed.

If I use interview material for presentation or publications within the 3-year time frame, utmost care will be taken so that subjects will not be identified. If I need to keep the material for more than three years, it will be kept in a secure place and will be destroyed when no longer needed.

The following chapter discusses the study's findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the qualitative study exploring the school experiences of foster children in Rhode Island as observed by their classroom teachers. The purpose of this study was threefold: to gain insight into the range of the children's classroom experiences, including their academic, social, and behavioral functioning; to explore how teachers cope with and process the unique challenges presented by these children; and to elicit the strategies they have developed to deal with this vulnerable population of students. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds, but they all expressed interest and concern regarding how these children were adapting; they openly acknowledged that foster children are at a disadvantage when navigating the educational system due to the psychological consequences of being in foster care, and were thoughtful in their recommendations.

In addition to basic demographic information about the teachers, and the extent of their teaching experience with foster children, the interview questions centered on four main areas of inquiry: 1) participants' observations of the academic, social, and emotional behavior patterns of foster children in their classrooms; 2) the nature of parent-teacher conferences concerning foster children; 3) respondents impressions and reactions in terms of special satisfactions and challenges encountered in their work with foster children and; 4) specific strategies they found helpful and their recommendations for working with foster children.

### *Demographics*

Three participants in this study were men and five were women, ranging in age from 27 to 48. Seven participants identified themselves as Caucasian while one participant identified as Black, Dominican, and Native American.

### *Educational and Employment Background of Subjects*

Only six participants had master's degrees, and two of them had two master's degrees. This included: One MA in Counseling and one MA in School Administration; five had MEd degrees in the following: ESL, Educational Psychology, Educational Leadership, and Special Education. All eight teachers had been teaching from three to ten years. Five teachers reported that they had previous experience with foster children other than in their role as teachers, such as being a foster parent, working in the Department of Social Services, and being a mentor. Five teachers reported teaching more than three foster children during their careers.

### *Classroom Composition*

The eight teachers taught in two urban schools; one in a charter elementary school and seven in an alternative public high school. The seven high school teachers reported teaching regular education classes while the one elementary school teacher taught a special education class for children with ED (emotional disturbance). Students per class ranged from 8 to 15; six teachers reported having only one foster child per class, and two teachers had from two to five foster children in each class. Three teachers taught foster children this year; three had foster students last year, and two had foster children both

years. Two teachers reported that their foster care students dropped out of high school in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, after having them in their respective classes since 9<sup>th</sup> grade.

The alternative public high school is unique in many aspects. One unusual feature is that the entire school is divided into advisories of approximately 15 students and one teacher, who stay together for much of the day through all four years. Teachers, who are referred to as “advisors”, are seen as educators and advocates. The advisory system creates an intimate environment where “advisors” are given the opportunity to really know each child. Students learn through real world experiences, or internships, which are based on their individual interests; their academic skills are developed in advisory and implemented through meaningful project work centered at their internships. The school prides itself on personalizing learning and building a sense of community and shared responsibility within each advisory.

The elementary charter school also fosters a sense of community and togetherness amongst its students. The school prides itself on differentiated learning and employing a responsive classroom approach in which teachers model and facilitate peer communication, problem solving, and other social skills.

### *Classroom Experiences*

*Question 10: How did you learn of your student's [students'] foster care status?*

Four subjects reported that they were informed of their students' foster care status by the "foster parent," while three reported that their students told them. One respondent reported that her student was "returned to DCYF custody" by his adoptive parents and that his adoptive parents informed her of this transition to being a foster child. Two

participants noted that the foster parent was also a "teacher at the school" and shared this information with them. All respondents reported that they were informed "right away".

*Question 11: Do you believe other children in your class are aware when a student is a foster child? If so, how do they respond to this awareness?*

One participant felt that the students were unaware of foster care status: "He is very private in that sense...He doesn't speak with the other kids in the advisory about any of his out of school experiences or relationships." According to this teacher, the student's desire to keep his personal life private affects his willingness to talk about being in foster care and subsequently limits his social interactions with others.

Seven participants believed that their students were aware when a classmate was a foster child. Four participants, who replied that other students were aware of the child's foster status, believed this awareness had a positive impact on how other students interacted with those in foster care. One participant commented: "...they are actually supportive of their needs and don't pick on them as much." Another noted: "I think once they realized his situation, they had more empathy and patience for him."

One subject replied: "They responded very positively and very well," but also indicated that "the first time they got annoyed with him, that's what they used to press his buttons." This response, which came from the elementary school teacher, was the only one that carried a negative undertone.

The other three teachers reported that it "didn't make a difference" to the other students. One teacher stated: "Because the student was so open, they just accepted it, they didn't care." Another replied: "Because it was an inner-city school and a lot of the kids had stuff...it was just another piece of stuff that we would be talking about."

*Question 12: Does the subject of family life and/or family diversity ever come up in class?*

All the teachers responded that conversations regarding family life and/or family diversity come up in class. Examples included: divorce, varying parenting styles, socioeconomic status, family structure, and sexuality. One participant replied: "In advisory we talked a lot about our upbringing and our experiences." Another explained: "...that thread goes through everything we do." One commented: "Stuff like that comes up frequently in open discussion; because it is such a diverse school different students have different backgrounds, different values, and those values clash sometimes...I encourage these discussions because it opens kids up, they become more open-minded." When speaking about the content of these conversations, one participant, who had multiple students in foster care, stated: "...like the parenting styles of a nuclear family and how they go on trips and such, versus a foster care family where they don't do things like that, depending on the foster care parents."

*Question 13: Do you notice that foster children react differently to this subject matter than other students? If so, how?*

Five teachers reported that their foster students reacted differently from other students to the subject matter of family life. A common thread raised by these teachers was witnessing a change in their foster student's behavior. Some comments were:

"You can tell that their body language changes and sometimes they get really moody that particular day."

"There was an element of family life that was different from the other kids...and that brought up a lot of anxiety."

"Now he seems more quiet when we talk about plans over vacation etc."

Christmas time was really hard for her...her behavior changed around this time. Her foster mom warned me about everything...almost overly so...in some ways you see what you are told you are going to see, but the kid refused to go to her internship and stormed out of school and did things that she didn't normally do.

Two participants, while tentative in their responses, ultimately concluded that their foster students did not react differently. One commented: "I don't think so. Most of the time it just made her speak about having to be more independent and having to grow up a lot faster than other kids her age." Another reported: "Not really. He was very open about how his mother treated him and things he went through. Before vacations he was always trying to latch on to other classmate or me." This teacher's response to her student's unusual behavior implies a possible lack of communication or understanding about the meaning of his behavior.

One teacher was unsure: "It is hard to say. He's quiet; he's depressed; he always has the same look on his face."

These findings raise the question of reliability of some of the teachers' observations in terms of whether foster students may be sensitive to this particular subject matter but are not communicating their concerns in an open way to their teachers. This point is discussed further in the concluding summary.

*Question 14: Does the subject of family diversity receive attention within the school? If so, how?*

Four subjects felt that, overall, the subject of family diversity receives attention on a school wide scope. One participant reported: "People tell their stories and they come from different kinds of families." Another stated: "Because it was an inner-city school

and a lot of the kids had issues, some of their parents were in jail or some had two moms or two dads, the school as a whole discussed those issues far more.” These “stories” were noted to come up as part of a weekly all school morning meeting, in which staff and students are encouraged to share their experiences. For example, one teacher described a student who shared her adoption story with the entire school as a way to get other students interested in the adoption agency she was interning at.

Two participants reported that while family diversity is not specifically discussed, it is often addressed within the context of diversity as a whole; "Everything about the philosophy of the school is centered on celebrating diversity, so within that context."

One participant initially stated "yes" to this question, but then changed her mind and replied: "Not really. It comes up in our advisory naturally during conversations and sharing, but not as a whole school." One participant was unsure: "I am not sure if it gets up on a school wide level; in my advisory sure, but as a whole school...I don't really think so." These participants had difficulty when asked to cite examples of how conversations related to family diversity were implemented on a school-wide level; they were able to pinpoint how these conversations came up informally among peers or during advisory, but not as a school function.

*Question 15: Describe the social interactions between the foster child [or foster children] and other students, and with you as their teacher.*

This open-ended, two-part question produced a number of different responses in which some strong themes emerged. Three major themes in discussing the children's relationship with peers, included: difficulty interacting with others, attention-seeking, and minimal interactions with peers. Some of the responses related to these themes were:

"He would try to reach out for friends but people would push him away because of his behaviors. He lied, he stole, he killed animals; people weren't exactly dying to hang out with him."

She had a lot of attention-seeking behaviors. Very, very, very bright kid who would sort of play ditzy because kids would pay attention to her when she would say things that were flighty and stupid, which were funny to the other kids...She played much dumber than she actually was. So I think that was something that was related to self-esteem. She wasn't always able to just put her self out there as herself and feel like that was going to be good enough.

"He is not very social. He is also low-level functioning so social skills and academics are hard for him."

She is very open about being in foster care...but she has a lot of issues in terms of how she deals with other people. She can be really mature for her age and verbally articulate and seem kind of old, and then she can be really childish, like when she told some kid to 'go drink bleach'. Of course it's the kid with Aspergers that she has conflict with all the time. I think it's because she has issues of her own that she doesn't like to see reflected in him.

In the beginning the student was shy and withdrawn at first, but then the true her started to come out. She was very rambunctious, not necessarily in a good way all the time. It always seemed like she had to prove herself or prove something.

One response that differed from the rest came from the only elementary school teacher in the study:

Initially he came in and his foster care status made him special to the other kids...so he was treated with gloves and was very welcomed in, being the new student. If they were then looking for something to needle him with, that's what would come up. He felt special initially, but then felt different. His interactions with kids were definitely different, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse because of his status. He reacted emotionally...with upset. It took me a little while as the teacher to realize that that also could become a point of manipulation as well...so during math time he would become particularly teary and missing his mom. So I had to start honing in on what was real and what wasn't.

This was the only respondent to indicate that other children would purposefully talk about their parents as a way to shun the foster student. This behavior also occurred in

the context of an elementary school class, where children are at a more immature level emotionally than high school students would be, and it's unclear whether this might have been in "retaliation" for some of the foster child's behaviors which in some way the others found "provocative," or "annoying".

Answers regarding the foster child's interaction with the teacher continued to be diverse, with "manipulation", cited by four participants, being the only clear theme to emerge, although some signs of positive feelings and interactions were present. Some of the comments were:

She can be really manipulative, she lies, but she also really appreciates getting support and she is aware of getting support. She'll have resentful moments of rebelling against authority. There was also some triangulation; she wanted to see whose side I was on. She is really kind of tough and draining.

“Strained, because he lied, he would copy homework, cheat all the time, was not accountable for his whereabouts. A lot of lying, manipulation that made our relationship strained. We still talk on AIM (AOL instant messenger), but the teacher-to-student relationship was not great.”

Other comments included:

He is very open, pretty honest. Sometimes I think he can be manipulative, like he uses the opportunity to talk about his personal life in order to get out of his academic responsibilities. This is an assumption by me, but it's only because I haven't seen him do any school work.

This teacher then shared a message this student left on his voicemail, which indicated how grateful this student was that this teacher had taken the time to talk to him about his relationship woes. The participant then commented: "He doesn't have a male role-model so I see it as my duty to fulfill that role for him."

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Her interactions with me were very clingy in a way. She definitely sought for and wanted approval. She would almost test me to see if I would continue to take an interest in her even when she wasn't following through with what she needed to do. She didn't like me very much in the beginning of the year. I was replacing a teacher that she had for three years already and she had just made this transition [to foster care] and she was having some conflicting emotions about her father. She really disliked me and let me know that repeatedly.

When asked a follow-up question regarding how this behavior was interpreted, he stated: "I understood this as her being threatened by change, which I had anticipated."

Two additional thoughts were:

"For the most part they were good, but with her it was just like everyone else; it's fine until they have to do work and then it's like I'm the bad guy."

"My relationship with him was...one of the nurturing mom substitute. I don't think he would have needed as much of that from me had he been from a traditional home situation."

*Question 16: When you have parent teacher conferences do you meet with the child's [or children's] foster parents, the biological parents, or both?*

Four participants indicated that they meet exclusively with their student's foster parent. In addition to the foster parents, one subject stated that she meets with "the whole team" including: foster parents or group home parent (depending on placement), clinical psychologist, clinical coordinator, and DCYF case worker and supervisor. "Our meetings would be with about 15 people and we had them monthly."

While two respondents reported having conferences with both the biological (or adoptive) parent and the foster parent, their experiences differed. One teacher had conferences with both the biological parent and the foster parent, albeit separately. He explained: "At first it was both...but separately. As the student moved into her

independent living situation, I didn't meet with the foster mom at all. At that point it was pretty much her biological mom who I met with." When explaining why the meetings were done separately he stated: "I don't think it would have been productive to have them there in the same room. I think that there would have been an awful lot of competition between them."

The second teacher indicated that the parent-teacher conferences were with both the adoptive parents and the group home staff; "Now that he is living in a group home we are scheduling a meeting with his adoptive parents, some school staff, and the staff at the group home." The teacher elaborated: "He was originally a foster child in their home. They then adopted him (around 4 or 5 years old) but this year he has returned to DCYF custody and lives in a group home."

One subject responded: "Neither...ever." This teacher explained that he has only been with this group of students for four months; in that time he has been unable to get in touch with any adult regarding this student.

*Question 17: Are these conferences different in any way from conferences with parents of non-foster children?*

This question was only applicable to seven participants, as one teacher indicated never meeting with parents; an array of responses was elicited regarding the nature of parent-teacher conferences. Four participants said "yes", these conferences were different from those with parents of non-foster children. Some comments were:

Yes, because sometimes the foster parents don't know how long they are going to have them for. Two of my foster parents eventually adopted them and the other ones...are having so many conflicts, so they kind of want to return them back. I walk a fine line where I'm trying to give them a more positive reinforcement of what they are doing at school, especially if they are having so much of a negative

impact at home. I try to show how, here, this is what they are doing to show maturity and responsibility; to give them a different outlook.

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...because he came with such social skill deficits...we focused a whole lot more on the social skills he was learning. He was very behind in school, so instead of addressing those academic issues we did a whole lot of addressing where he was before with the social skills and then talked about how we could make him feel more confident and comfortable academically, but the academics were not the focus of the parent meetings where generally they would be.

When responding "yes" to this question, two teachers spontaneously noted how frustrating it is when a student is bounced around within the foster care system because all the backtracking that must be done with each new foster parent or group home parent.

One noted:

As an advisor you are used to building relationships with a parent and it builds over time, but with this student, who was getting bounced around all the time, it was difficult to get the adults in his life on board with the [school's] plan. So I had to keep starting over. In his three years, he had a minimum of 7-10 placements.

Three teachers found that these meetings are not different, although one noted:

"Usually they are not, but the next one we are scheduling may be. We are focused on helping him transition into life after high school." Another participant commented:

The content of them was exactly the same. The only difference was that the student had some motivational difficulties as a student, and had a lot of anxiety surrounding the college process and the proposition of graduating and moving away. A lot of those I think were connected to the foster family experience. I don't do anything differently in those meetings than I would have with anybody else.

*Question 18: Do you have any contact with the school social worker, child welfare or other agencies on behalf of your foster student [or students]? If so, please describe.*

All participants responded in an affirmative manner, stating they had contact with either an in-school social worker or an independent social worker (LICSW) contracted by

the school. One commented: "I interact with our school social worker to make sure that my student sees her fairly regularly. She helped me set-up weekly drug testing for him as well." Another was not so positive in her response: "Yes, but it was hard because even though we had a school social worker, she wasn't there for any amount of time, so we had to deal with everything ourselves, and then get referrals and try to make it happen."

Five teachers reported having contact with DCYF, generally on an inconsistent basis, unless placement issues arose. Other agencies and/or resources mentioned were: ORS (Office of Rehabilitation Services), CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocate), educational advocate, and outside therapists. Through these comments it was obvious that the children were receiving services and that the teachers seemed aware and involved.

#### *School Performance*

*Question 19: From your perspective, as compared to other children in your class, have you noticed the foster child [or children] present any particular difficulties either academically, behaviorally or socially?*

Three teachers reported that foster children present particular behavioral difficulties as compared to other students. One replied: "She has a temper; she has never been violent here, but she can be really vicious sometimes." Another said: "He called me a bitch the first week of school...He was always lying and plagiarizing other people's work."

The other five teachers either said "no" or did not label their behaviors as a "behavioral problem". Some comments were: "I have noticed that they tend to need more attention and care. They may also have "melt-downs" over things that might seem small at first." Another said: "She wasn't a behavior problem per se...I had to check in with her

a lot during independent work time because she could get distracted; she wasn't going to keep herself on track, let's put it that way."

Most participants stated that their students in foster care exhibited difficulties socially. The following comment is reflective of these responses: "Because of his social skill deficits, it made it very hard for him to make and keep friends in a way that was positive." Another teacher felt that "low self-esteem" got in the way of the student being able to form positive relationships.

Participants more readily pinpointed challenges related to social interactions, which they distinguished from behavioral issues. This is an important point as it highlights how these teachers are making sense of the behaviors they observe.

As compared to other students, seven teachers noted that students in foster care present particular academic difficulties. Responses were varied and included: "poor motivation to achieve success", "high anxiety", "poor school attendance", and "multiple school transfers." This will be discussed in further detail in the following segment.

*Question 20: How do you think the foster child is [or foster children are] faring academically as compared with other students in your class? What do you attribute this to?*

Most teachers responded that these students were either "behind" or "below grade level"; one stated: "Skill wise she is probably slightly above grade level, but that is below her potential. In a traditional setting, which is where she was before here, she was basically flunking out." Three teachers attributed their students' academic difficulties to unaddressed socio-emotional issues stemming from abuse and neglect. Some comments were: "Some of them have been so abused that they shut down in school...in the way that

they interact with their peers and even in the way they approach their school work; they just don't care, it's not relevant to them."... "He was incredibly bright, so that was not the issue at all; I think the problem was him not being in school."

Four teachers believe chaotic environmental factors are to blame for school problems: "She just seems to be one of those kids whose living in chaos a lot of the time, whether internal or external...but mostly internal. You can't rely on her and she doesn't feel like she can rely on herself." Another one commented:

At some point she was about the same and then she started to fall way behind and I think a part of that was due to her mom becoming a part of her life again...she wasn't necessarily the best person for her to be around at that point.

One teacher thought that the foster student was "average", but acknowledged that this was because of the strong academic and emotional support she had; "If it weren't for the supports she got, she probably would have performed below average. With the supports, she was about average."

While each participant answered the question posed, three emphasized the importance of meeting each student where he or she was at, and then measuring their progress from there, instead of just comparing him or her to others. One commented: "If we were meeting him where he was, he was doing fabulous in terms of the progress he had made. But as compared to the other kids, he was very clearly two years behind."

*Question 21: As compared to other children in your class, does the foster child [or do foster children] present particular strengths?*

All the teachers felt that foster children present particular strengths as compared to other students. Common characteristics used to describe these strengths were: "resilient", "compassionate", "resourceful", and "a gifted writer". After posing this

question, three participants needed a minute to gather their thoughts, while three answered immediately, with enthusiasm in their voices. For example, one stated: "Oh god yeah! They are very independent. They are leaders. They are more streetwise than my other students." Another claimed: "Resilience. The ability to not be so hung up on image. She was a really tolerant person. She was the main advocate for a student in the class who was really trying. She was a sucker for hard luck cases!"

Two teachers presented a mixed picture of both strengths and difficulties. One said: "She is very compassionate...she is either compassionate or cold." Another replied: "He was very engaging at first; he had a great first impression."

*Question 22: Do you think that there are any special challenges for foster children within the school system?*

All participants strongly agreed that there are special challenges for foster children within the school system. Responses centered on the following: Lack of access to school records, lack of familial support, feeling different, and emotional trauma. Three teachers referred to the children's traumatic backgrounds, and one stated: "There was something traumatic which led them to be in foster care in the first place, so number one, those problems aren't solved over night, or by just making the transition. So, they are going to need to work through whatever that was."

Three participants, including the teacher who was also a foster mother, discussed the problem of frequent changes in schools due to residential mobility and lagging records. She stated: "There are special challenges for foster children period because of all the bouncing around, which I think would carry into the school system. Also, improper placements because of lagging records, which happens all the time in public schools."

Two teachers discussed the problem of foster children feeling different from children with stable families. One stated:

Having to hear their classmates speak about family life and what they would probably perceive as a normal family...their friends have a stable home and a roof over their head, while foster kids have to carry the burden of knowing that they don't have the same things their peers have.

Two participants commented on the challenges created by inconsistent home lives, and multiple placements. One stated:

Who is really setting the rules? A lot of things happen that are not in their control; it's hard to do school work when you don't have security like that. Maybe one foster parent thinks you should do math one way and another one thinks you should do it this way...who is really there to support her as a student?

*Question 23: Have you experienced any special satisfactions in working with a foster child [or foster children]?*

Seven participants acknowledged experiencing special satisfactions in working with foster students. Two expressed the emotional payoff of watching a child succeed as being extremely gratifying. One explained:

Watching him grow, and grow so rapidly...and watching him flourish under this incredible love that was offered to him from his foster parent, and then from his peers and the adults in the school. It was the gift of acknowledging that what I always thought to be true is true; that if you water a garden it's going to grow and he was being watered in way that just was amazing for him.

Four teachers spoke of the appreciation and gratitude shown to them by their foster students as being extremely satisfying. One participant replied: "Yes, they appreciate the extra care and attention and they need it!"

Two teachers had a foster student drop out of school; one reported feeling a special satisfaction during periods of progress, but there was a sadness to her response when she spoke of her inability to keep this student in school: "When we had good times,

we had really good times. So it was really sad that I couldn't keep her motivated enough to stay in school, even though I really tried everything." The second teacher reported not feeling satisfied because of the outcome: "the one I had was not successful. I don't feel especially satisfied because he didn't change that much."

It is of interest that teachers were gratified when they could see their students progress, and dissatisfied and unhappy when their students did not progress. This observation will be discussed further in the Conclusions section of this chapter.

*Question 24: What type of help/services do you think these children need, if any? Are they able to access these resources through the school?*

All the teachers believe foster children should have access to mental health services including: "social services", "counselors", "advocates", and "intensive therapy". Some simply stated: "They need stable adults" or "Big Brother/Big Sister". One participant added: "Academic records need to be passed on, which doesn't always happen. I have been teaching this class for four months now and still don't have a copy of [my student's] IEP [individualized education plan]." Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), requires public schools to develop an IEP for every student with a disability who is found to meet the federal and state requirements for special education. Another participant suggested that foster children would benefit from having the adults in their lives supported as well; "Everyone [foster child, foster parent, and teacher] was supported in their particular roles...So I wasn't feeling, as a classroom teacher, that I was so alone."

While all the teachers suggested that their foster students are able to access these resources through school, two spoke of the difficulties of doing this; one stated: "This is

available at our school but our resources get stretched thin." Another teacher commented: "We had a program with a sorority and they had Big Sisters through them," . . . [but] "we had to do all the footwork" in terms of making referrals because the school social worker "wasn't here for any amount of time."

*Question 25: Have you been able to develop any effective strategies in dealing with some of these challenges? If so, what were these strategies? Was help available to you within the school system to deal with special challenges?*

All the teachers felt they were able to develop effective strategies in dealing with some of these challenges, and responded in a number of ways, with themes being related to, "communication" or "checking-in", attentiveness, and facilitating connections. Some comments were:

"Parent and mentor meetings are very helpful. When we are all on the same page and working towards the same goals, progress seems easier to make."

Checking-in with her [the foster child] a lot; knowing what times of the year were going to be particularly difficult for her or what kind of tasks were going to be particularly difficult, which meant that I would make myself available for extra help around those times.

Additional comments included:

"Trying to gauge when something was going on, to see if I could try to help her diffuse some stuff; or trying to get her to make connections with other people she could talk to."

"Checking in on any stories he had, which was a lot of work and draining; not just accepting sneaky behavior; knowing that anything he said could be a lie."

Another teacher outlined a four pronged approach:

There are four strategies...1) find another teacher who has a foster child in their classroom that I could talk to about that; 2) Set the foster parent up immediately with another foster parent who had a kid in the school so that she could walk her through the PTO's [parent-teacher organization] and all those other kinds of situations; 3) I would get a student mentor for the student; 4) I would really make sure as a classroom teacher that I knew academically where he was coming from...because he came with nothing. Our school couldn't access his records for months.

Two teachers discussed facilitating connections via internships. These teachers intuitively understood the motivating force of making learning relevant to all students, especially those in foster care. One teacher commented:

That's why my goal is to get them into an internship they really love, which is hard. When you first ask them 'what are your interests or passions', they don't even know what they are passionate about. Ironically enough, these students want to advocate and go into social services...they want to change it and make it better.

In terms of whether or not help was available within the school system to deal with special challenges, three teachers felt help was available, one said it was not available, and three said it was but with strong limitations. One teacher didn't answer this question.

All of the teachers reporting that they received assistance indicated that they received help from the school social worker. Three teachers indicated help had its limitations, one stated: "Social services, yes, but [they] were very limited. Not much else is offered. You are here as an educator but you also need to address the socio-emotional piece. They will bring people in, but you have to find them." Another teacher stated that help is offered by the "learning specialist", and added: "...but for the most part it falls on me."

### *Recommendations*

*Question 26: Do you feel teachers could benefit from some orientation to working with foster children? If yes, what would you recommend be included in this orientation?*

Seven participants believe that teachers could benefit from some orientation to working with foster children; one participant said "yes and no". The following response is typical of the answers given by five participants: "I feel like teachers need to get basic background information on the foster care system. Teachers need to be trained on how to use support systems such as social workers or special educators. A lot of teachers don't know who to call or when to call for help." Two other teachers added to this response, one stating: "To just know what the kid is experiencing, to hear more stories; I think that would be helpful."

Two teachers felt that understanding the etiology of the children's problems would be helpful, such as: "Separation anxiety, fear of failure, and PTSD." Another said: "Attachment disorders and the bouncing around factor that most of them experience."

The participant who said, "yes and no", elaborated further: "Far too many times teachers develop biases before they even begin working with [the] student." In a similar vein another teacher responded: "You don't want to brand them, but just to know what can happen within the foster care system."

*Question 27: Do you feel teachers could benefit from training to work with children with emotional and/or educational problems? If yes, what would you recommend be included in this training?*

Eight participants felt that teachers could "absolutely" benefit from training to work with children with emotional and/or educational problems. Five participants offered

recommendations including "identifying red flags" and "how a kid gets an IEP". One subject commented: "Very little of that is included in traditional teacher education, its more classroom management. There really should be more sensitivity to those specific kinds of educational issues. I think taking a holistic approach to a child is really important." Another participant, who is now a school administrator, suggested how to get this type of training in a cost effective way.

Professional development is few and far between. Within a school there is always someone who has had a foster kid or knows differentiated instruction, or what ever the problem is, in the next room. If there was just more communication in the group they wouldn't have to pay for it. Or you could call an outside agency...like Child and Family Services...I'm sure they would do a gratis workshop.

*Question 28: Do you have any recommendations regarding how foster children could be supported in school?*

This open-ended question produced a myriad of responses regarding how foster children could be supported in school. Many comments appeared reflective of previous responses. Some of the diverse comments were:

"Meet the child where they are at. Support the foster child through making sure the teacher knows where they come from. Making sure we immediately put support into place for the foster parent and foster child."

One thing that was really positive for this child was when she took a leadership role in an anger management group; anger management wasn't her issue but she was able to work closely with the school social worker. I think the group dynamic was helpful for her. A group where foster kids could talk about what is going on for them might be really helpful.

"I think openness, respect, counseling support, and adult communication are all important elements."

It's a Catch 22. It is important to be aware of their background so that you know when certain events are coming up that might be tough for that kid...I feel like it is good to know, but then again you don't want to label the student so that they stand out and get attention for all the wrong reasons.

The variety of responses to this issue highlighted: supporting foster children through several different mediums (i.e. mental health services, access to records, etc.), minimizing transitions and/or transferring to different schools; creating a safe and supportive environment at school so that these students will feel comfortable opening up and accepting help. Two teachers discussed the importance of not openly discussing a student's foster care status due to the attached "stigma" by other children and adults.

#### *Ending Questions*

*Question 29: If you have had other experiences teaching foster children prior to the past 2 years, are there any memories you would like to share of these experiences?*

Three teachers shared memories related to their previous experiences teaching foster children.

One teacher stated: "In my experience, [foster children] are so self-deprecating; they don't realize that they are good people or that they are going to get out of this rut. They think it is hopeless."

"Meeting the child where they are at. Having as much advanced notice as possible as to who this kid is and what their special needs are and, I don't necessarily mean academic or social, but whatever their special needs are so that we are not inadvertently setting them up."

"Some foster children do fine in school. I have a few kids who have gone through the system without any problems." This comment refers to this participant's experience as a foster mother.

*Question 30&31: Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to share?*

*Do you have any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns?*

Three participants wanted to add some final thoughts. In reference to the plight of foster children, one stated: "Some of these kids don't know what a family looks like. They have all these images of what a family looks like and then the reality is not what it is for them." Another commented: "More contact with the DCYF worker would have been nice to bridge the gap between DCYF and school." This response came up as the teacher discussed feeling weary of a particular foster parent, "You don't know if the foster parent is doing what she is supposed to do." One participant replied: "Support the whole picture; if the teacher is not being supported, the kid is not being supported; if the foster parent is not being supported, the kid is not being supported. A little understanding goes a long way."

One participant summed up the importance of taking a holistic approach with foster children noting the following: "I have a general concern that in a lot of cases the socio-emotional pieces go unaddressed in school, which is a huge disservice to these kids."

*Question 32: How did you feel about this interview?*

Four participants discussed their feelings in relation to the interview. Overall respondents felt the interview was thought-provoking; it caused them to think about their experiences from a different angle. One commented: "I thought it was helpful. It caused

me to dig deep inside." Another suggested: "It gave me the opportunity to reflect on my practice and to think about things I could be doing even with kids that aren't in foster care but who still have those same separation anxiety issues. Other comments were:

"It was interesting. I hadn't really thought about it that much."

"Knowing her history has given me a lens to understand what she has been through and how it impacts her behavior and academics."

### *Summary of Findings*

This chapter represents the major findings from a study exploring the school experiences of foster children in Rhode Island as observed by their primary teachers in order to gain insight into the children's classroom experiences and how the teachers deal with the challenges of working with this vulnerable population.

What makes this study distinctive is the nature of the educational systems and the extent of teacher involvement. Implicit in the alternative educational model is a primary focus on students rather than academic subjects and standardized test scores. At the alternative high school, for example, students have their "advisors" cell phone numbers and permission to call 24 hours a day. It is beyond the scope of this study to compare regular and alternative school environments, but research suggests that most teachers within traditional public schools, impacted by No Child Left Behind, are not equipped to effectively handle the type of individual needs presented by foster children (Anderson & Seita, 2006, Herrington, Kidd-Herrington, & Kritsonis, 2006, & Lynn et al., 2003).

The eight teachers interviewed were unique in many ways, as were the schools in which they taught. The structure of both schools, which emphasizes social responsibility and connectedness amongst staff and students, creates an environment that allows all

students to openly talk their personal struggles, including being in foster care, with the knowledge that they will be listened and responded to with respect and dignity. This open atmosphere helped create a sense of camaraderie amongst students that translated into increased empathy regarding the diverse challenges many foster children face.

Seven participants reported that students are aware when a classmate is in foster care; classmates are generally either supportive of their struggle or see it as a non-issue. At times, though, especially when angered, elementary school students were reported to use this knowledge in a taunting manner. All teachers reported encouraging open discussions amongst their students regarding family life, diversity, and other topics related to personal experiences. When discussing particulars of family life, five teachers reported noticing a change in their foster student's behavior, such as their acting out or becoming unusually quiet, especially around holidays and vacations. This illustrates the vulnerability of foster children even in optimal educational settings. One participant reflected:

The biggest thing...that is embedded in their soul... is that difference of coming from a situation that is different. Battling your own demons of rejection and of sadness, and of, 'are people talking about me' and 'what do people know', 'what do they not know', 'what do I share' and 'what do I not share'.

Even in a nurturing, empathetic environment, foster children's core sense of self is damaged.

Teachers reported a diverse range of academic, social, and behavioral functioning amongst foster students. However, the ability to adapt and be resilient in the face of adversity was not reported by all respondents; some foster children seemed amenable to help and the offer of a supportive relationship while some remained unresponsive. Even

those children who were amenable to help had academic and relationship problems reported by teachers, including “manipulative” behaviors.

Those teachers, who were validated in their efforts to help, via students’ appreciation and responsiveness, reported more positive outcomes. The two teachers, who experienced rejection, via their foster students dropping out, reported feelings of personal failure. During these interviews, both teachers felt compelled to repeatedly mention that they did everything they could to keep those students interested in school; they also questioned their appropriateness for this study given the unsuccessful outcomes. The implications of this finding will be discussed in the following chapter.

Whether teachers were validated or rejected in their efforts, all of them in some capacity attributed some piece of their foster child’s academic, social, and/or behavioral functioning to the foster care experience. They reported that their awareness of this experience increased their ability to be empathetic and understanding, even when their student was acting out or testing their patience. One teacher responded that his student’s initial dislike of him was related to the fact that change is difficult for this student and that trust needed to be slowly established before the student would be able to form a connection with him. Another teacher commented: “He was exposed to drugs/toxins before birth and has cognitive effects that make his academic growth difficult.” Lagging academic records were also seen as a barrier to academic achievement.

Regardless of the teachers’ varying levels of empathy, the majority acknowledged how stressful and draining the foster children’s neediness was for them; some of the teachers sought validation from the interviewer that they had done an adequate job given the variables.

An unanticipated finding that sporadically came out during two interviews was the role of the internship and how this was used as a way to reach their foster students academically and emotionally. While internships are required of all students, it is unclear whether the other high school teachers in this study used a similar approach because they did not discuss how they made educational use of their students' internships.

Another valuable finding elicited from this unique group of teachers was their interpretation of the behaviors observed. Five teachers chose to view the behaviors of their foster students as being related to social skill deficits as opposed to labeling them as behavioral, which is more damaging. This distinction is important because it illustrates how most of these teachers are making sense of their foster students' presentation. This implication will be elaborated in the next chapter.

Teachers mostly reported feeling supported in their role, but many of them also felt responsible for the well-being of their foster children, which was emotionally "draining"; teachers reported needing more resources. One commented: "Social services...were very limited. Not much else is offered. You are here as an educator but you also need to address the social-emotional piece. They will bring people in, but you have to find them." Although all the participants reported having contact with their school social worker, many of them reported that this was not enough to meet their foster students' extensive academic and social-emotional needs; there was a clear consensus that teachers must juggle multiple roles, which included teacher, social worker, advocate, and caretaker.

Those participants who reported being in contact with DCYF felt that more support from them would be helpful because of their limited knowledge regarding how to

navigate the foster care system. This data supports the finding of Altshuler (2003), which suggests that there is limited collaboration between schools and other child welfare agencies, which is a huge disservice to foster children. Participants unanimously reported that an orientation to working with foster children would be helpful. Finally, while all participants admitted having struggled with how to effectively support and educate their students in foster care, they also reported developing a number of effective strategies including prioritizing communication via frequent check-ins, being sensitive to their non-verbal cues, and accessing community-wide resources to help them. The implications for future study of these findings are discussed in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

This qualitative study explored the school experiences of foster children by asking their teachers how they perceive these students, and it also assessed how teachers cope with the unique challenges presented by them. The existing literature on foster children within the educational system tends to focus primarily on school social workers as meeting the many needs of foster children while downplaying the role of teachers; this research focuses on teachers. The findings of this study have generated valuable information, feedback, and direction for clinical social workers, teachers, administrators, and other professionals working with foster children in schools.

This study followed a qualitative, flexible, descriptive research design. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed; eight teachers working in two different Rhode Island schools were interviewed for one hour regarding their observations of the school experiences of foster children; one teacher taught in a charter elementary school and 7 taught in an alternative public high school. This was not originally the study's plan, as the intent was to focus exclusively on public elementary school teachers who would be working in a variety of school settings. As it developed, the nature of the school settings contributed to affording the students an unusually caring and supportive environment; this special group of teachers were also characterized by their caring and involvement. The picture presented in this study, with its many positive aspects, may not be typically found across all school settings. In fact, many writers, including Black (2006), Emerson

and Lovitt (2003), and Zetlin and Weinberg (2004), found that often teachers lacked knowledge of the extensive problems foster children have while in school and when they leave foster care.

The perceptions of teachers and their attitudes towards foster children were major variables included in the scope of this research. Particular attention was paid to the following: 1) how this vulnerable group of students is faring academically, socially, and behaviorally; 2) what resources are in place within the school structure to support them; 3) what strategies teachers have successfully employed in working with foster children and; 4) what areas teachers thought are in need of improvement.

This chapter explores the implications of some of the more prominent and salient findings in this study, including: 1) the impact of school and classroom climate, including individualized teaching and support on the academic, social, and behavioral functioning of foster children; 2) the effectiveness of making learning relevant through internships; 3) strategies used by teachers for dealing with the unique challenges presented by foster children; 4) the need for teachers to be supported in their roles through adequate access to a spectrum of resources and; 5) providing teachers with an orientation to working with foster children and with the foster care system. Also discussed in this chapter are the implications for social work, critique of methodology, study limitations, and recommendations for further research.

#### *Discussion of Major Findings*

The eight participants included seven high school teachers and one elementary school teacher, who have all taught a foster child [or children] within the last two years. They all expressed concern about the plight of foster children within the school system,

and they all made attempts, in various ways, to understand and support the children's unique needs.

While this diverse group of teachers reported a range of academic, social, and behavioral functioning amongst foster students, they all identified at least one area of functioning where their students were behind, which included mainly academic work and social functioning. Academically, seven teachers responded that their foster students were either behind or below grade level; two students in foster care dropped out of school during their junior year of high school. Socially, seven teachers reported that foster students had social skill deficits, which hinders their ability to make and keep friends in a way that is positive. Three respondents indicated that their foster students presented particular behavioral difficulties as compared to other children. These responses support the findings of Altshuler (2003), Clausen et al. (1998), Emerson and Lovitt (2003), Geroski and Knauss (2000), Gustavsson (1991), Gustavsson and MacEachron (2007), Zetlin et al. (2003), and Zetlin and Weinberg (2004).

There was a range of responses related to the ability of foster students to adapt and be resilient in the face of adversity; some foster children responded positively to help and the offer of a supportive relationship while others remained unresponsive, and yet, the teachers' felt "responsible" for helping all the children, and disappointed when they [the teachers] felt they had "failed". Those students, who were responsive and appreciative, validated their teachers' efforts, while those who were more rejecting tended to undermine the teachers' sense of competency; even when interactions between teacher and student were negative and stressful, these experiences were not necessarily felt to be undermining to all teachers. It was significant that two teachers were upset

when their two children dropped out of school and experienced painful feelings of having failed. Understanding this phenomenon should be part of teacher training and ongoing administrative support.

The three teachers, who identified their foster students as having behavioral issues, reported feeling “drained”; “neediness” was another characteristic that caused teachers to feel emotionally “drained”. While all of these respondents were aware of their foster child’s history, including why they were removed from home, this awareness did not cushion the emotional toll teachers experienced while working with this population. Nor did the awareness necessarily translate into an understanding of their foster child’s behavior from a psychosocial perspective. One teacher reported that her foster student “lied”, “stole”, and “killed animals”, which are certainly challenging behaviors to understand without a firm grasp on the psychological consequences of being abused, and being removed from home. This teacher also indicated that his “manipulation” caused their relationship to be “strained”. This also raises the question of whether this child needed more intensive treatment, possibly residential, (especially in regard to killing animals), than he may have been receiving. While evaluating the children was beyond the scope of this study, one should keep in mind, in doing future research, whether the foster child was in an appropriate setting.

Manipulation was a common theme that cropped up when discussing the challenges of working with foster children. In dealing with some of the more difficult behaviors, such as “manipulation”, one participant theorized that the foster child in his class “...uses the opportunity to talk about his personal life in order to get out of his academic responsibilities.” He went on to say: “This is an assumption by me but it’s only

because I haven't seen him do any school work.” This comment suggests how teachers struggle to make sense of challenging behaviors. Understanding how teachers respond to behavioral issues is important as it sheds light on teacher-student dynamics. Studies by Allen (2003) and Birch and Ladd (1998) suggest that children's behaviors impact the subsequent relationships formed with teachers; children who act out behaviorally are more likely to get locked into a detrimental pattern of relating with their teachers.

The way teachers' interpreted the behaviors observed by their foster students was noteworthy. Five teachers chose to view the behaviors of their foster students as being related to social skill deficits as opposed to labeling them as behavioral. Viewing a child as having social skill deficits, as opposed to behavioral difficulties, is a more optimistic outlook because social skill deficits are often seen as amenable to change with the proper help, whereas behavioral issues are often connected with character flaws. Children with social skill deficits are viewed as appropriate for an inclusive education model, while students with behavioral issues fall into the category of children described in Black's (2006) research as at risk for being "...suspended or expelled for being aggressive and disruptive, bringing them a step closer to the school-to-prison pipeline. Kids who are labeled troublemakers in school often 'drift dangerously toward becoming self-fulfilling,' Finkelstein says" (p. 50). With understanding the psychological consequences of being in foster care, teachers can redefine how they make sense of negative behaviors, such as aggression and acting out.

The importance of focusing on social competence has been well-documented: "Because social competence is often viewed as a protective factor (Benard, 1993; Kirby & Fraser, 1997; Masten, 1994; Wang, Haertel, & Walberg, 1998), one way of building

resilience is to develop social competence” (as cited in Brooks, 2006, p. 71). The two schools represented in this study share similar philosophies, which promote the importance of community, building social competency, and tailoring education plans to meet the needs of individual students. Both schools provide small classes, and are comprised of a diverse mix of inner-city students. Teachers reported that students are encouraged to talk about their personal experiences and upbringing, which helps them develop caring relationships with one another.

Seven teachers reported that their students are aware when a classmate is in foster care. This knowledge either “didn’t make a difference” to the other kids, because everybody had their own “stuff”, or it positively impacted how the other students related to these students. Many of the students in this inner-city high school also had difficult family problems, such as having a parent in prison, which they shared with the group. This is in stark contrast to other research which suggests that: “Some kids withdraw, ashamed of being in foster care and worried their classmates will find out” (Black, 2006, p. 50).

An in-depth qualitative study done by Hines et al. (2005), with 14 former foster youth currently attending college, found that, “...all 14 respondents in the sample reported feeling different from others...Most were also aware of the stigma related to being in foster care and how it set them apart from other children” (p. 385). When discussing special challenges for foster children within the school system, three teachers mentioned the “stigma” associated with being in foster care. One teacher commented: “And also the stigma of foster kids, to have to hide that...they don’t want their peers to know they live in a shelter or group home.” The finding that most children were

accepting of the foster child's status suggests that even if peers are being accepting, foster children can harbor internalized feelings of shame, which can be manifested by feeling stigmatized or different, when the reality may be more benign.

All of the teachers in this study were aware of the circumstances surrounding their student's foster care placement. According to Zetlin and Weinberg (2004), "Teachers are less likely to invest in children they do not know well, and children attending new schools may feel socially isolated or marginalized" (p. 919). Most of the respondents, who experienced validation from their foster students in their attempts to support and connect with them, were able to make sense of their challenging behavior in light of their foster care experience. This occurred regardless of whether they were formally trained or oriented to working with foster children, which most of them were not. One teacher commented:

Some of them have been so abused that they totally shut down in school, the way they interact with their peers and even in the way they approach their school work; they just don't care, it's not relevant to them. They are not in a place where they are happy. They just don't adapt and connect to the school work or things that they are doing. That's why my goal is to get them into an internship they really love, which is hard. When you first ask them 'what are your interests or passions', they don't even know what they are passionate about. Ironically enough, these students want to advocate and go into social services...they want to change it and make it better.

This comment highlights a noteworthy implication of this study; students will often succeed if learning is individualized to meet their needs and identify their passions and strengths. Individualized learning allows teachers to prioritize the social-emotional well-being of their foster students over test scores. Herrington, Kidd-Herrington, and Kritsonis (2006) contend, "Their motivation to cooperate and learn is not linear because

they have learned to perceive and experience reality differently....linkage between a specific grade and motivation to learn is very weak” (pp. 3&5).

Internships, which are a requirement for all students, are the mainstay of the alternative public high school as academic skills and project work are implemented at these sites. An unanticipated finding with significant implications, which cropped up sporadically in interviews, revolved around internships; two teachers reported that their foster student’s found internships related to their foster care experience. They both reported that their students responded well to these internships and were able to connect with positive mentors who understood their situations and provided them with additional support and guidance. These students not only attained meaningful internships, but they were able to establish positive connections with other adults in the community. Brooks (2006) writes, “Caring and supportive relationships with trusted adults are essential to children’s development, providing an important form of protection” (Benard, 1991; Pianta & Walsh, 1998; Schorr, 1997, as cited in Brooks, p. 71). Additionally, these connections can serve as powerful resources for foster students when they need referrals or recommendations for college and/or jobs. Since foster children historically have difficulty finding gainful employment or attaining higher education, these connections are invaluable. Since discussing the role of internships was not a planned part of the interview, the internship experiences of the other foster students in this study was not explored.

This study suggests that classroom climate is a significant factor in enhancing the foster child’s chance for a successful school outcome. A classroom that is designed to meet the individual educational needs of foster children through differentiated learning

and, for those in high school, relevant internships can protect a foster child from the frequent outcome of ending up “in the criminal justice system or on welfare when they become adults” (Zetlin et al., 2003, p. 106).

Many respondents indicated that academics were not initially a priority for their students in foster care because of the emotional turmoil that has characterized their lives. Therefore, these teachers met the children “where they were at,” effectively providing social-emotional well-being rather than emphasizing academic achievement. When discussing her foster child’s strengths, one teacher indicated: “His resiliency was amazing...in a month’s time he looked like a different kid. His social skill deficits became a non-issue.” This comment supports the suggestion that by focusing on the social-emotional piece first, a child is given the opportunity to thrive. However, it must be kept in mind that some children in foster care have been so badly traumatized and emotionally damaged, that they may not be able to respond to a benign school atmosphere.

Throughout the course of the interview, five teachers mentioned the importance of being aware of situations which were emotional “triggers” for their foster students. This awareness allowed them to provide additional support to their students during difficult times, such as the holidays. Emerson and Lovitt (2003) contend: “Anticipate situations in which the youths’ difficulties with peers or adults might surface” (p. 202). These five teachers also discussed the importance of knowing where their students “come from.”

One teacher commented:

Having as much advanced notice as possible as to who this kid is and what their special needs are...and I don’t necessarily mean academic or social...but whatever their special needs are so that we are not inadvertently setting them up,

like calling on Leroy to do a read aloud, but Leroy can't read. Maybe the kid has been sexually abused, we certainly don't want to put hands on them in any way...those sort of things we want to know.

Adequate support for teachers is crucial to the future success of foster children. In spite of alternative educational models described in this study, and the attention given to the students, teachers seemed to feel that they needed more resources, such as a more active school social worker. For example, a number of respondents reported that they needed to find resources themselves for their foster students. According to Brooks (2006),

Schools cannot serve as effective resilience-building environments unless they enable school personnel to function at an optimal level. Teachers who are stressed, inadequately trained, or not supported by their administrators are unlikely to be effective in developing resilience in their students (p. 72).

One teacher summed up the importance of supporting the adults in foster children's lives with this comment: "Support the whole picture; if the teacher is not being supported, the kid is not being supported; if the foster parent is not being supported, the kid is not being supported. A little understanding goes a long way." This finding has been emphasized in previous research (Brooks, 2006; Geroski & Knauss, 2000; Gustavsson, 1991; Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2007; Zetlin et al., 2003; Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004).

Teachers do not implicitly know about the psychological consequences of being in foster care. Without this knowledge, teachers might be inclined to view their foster student's behavior as related to character flaw, as opposed to emotional damage.

"Schools can educate their teachers and support staff about foster care, it's impact on the child and learning, and strategies to improve outcomes" (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p.

920). This knowledge might help insulate the personal failure some teachers experience when their efforts to help foster students are rejected.

Many teachers spoke about their limited knowledge regarding DCYF and how to successfully navigate the “system” or effectively advocate for their foster students. As Zetlin and Weinberg (2004) contend, “...the educational and child welfare systems can work collaboratively by appointing liaisons from each agency who can work together on cases and advocate for appropriate educational solutions” (p. 921). Liaisons would serve an invaluable function as they would effectively support both the foster student and the student’s teacher.

#### *Implications for Social Work*

Hundreds of children are placed in foster care each year, with children from poor and minority families consistently being over-represented in this population. The psychological consequences of being removed from home are profound; children who have been abused or maltreated suffer the most. School is the one common-ground for all children. With the proper supports in place, school can provide this vulnerable population with a chance at future success. Social workers and educators alike are in a powerful position to ameliorate the emotional toll of being in foster care, which all too often robs these children of achieving success.

Social workers can serve as a pivotal force in educating and supporting teachers. Social workers are desperately needed to act as a liaison between school and other social agencies, particularly DCYF, as well as mental health agencies, in order to ensure that their needs are being met and that they are not getting lost in the system. Social workers could also develop school wide professional development days to assist teachers in

navigating DCYF, accessing resources, and understanding the host of difficulties commonly experienced by foster children. It might also be useful to connect teachers working with foster children so that they can act as a support system for one another and share ideas regarding useful strategies.

Social workers could also provide individual and family counseling for foster children, including counseling about their school adaptations, offer groups for foster children to share their experiences with each other, and can provide social skills training.

#### *Critique of Methodology*

An advantage of this study's methodology was the utilization of a qualitative research model, which proved effective for the purpose of the research; it elicited information I asked about on the questionnaire, and it led to some additional findings, such as the usefulness of internships in reaching foster students. Data collected from this study can be a source for further research as well as a source for discussion among other interested individuals working with foster children.

#### *Limitations*

Limitations of this study include small sample size, narrow geographic area, lack of diversity among participants, and lack of school heterogeneity. Initially, my plan was to interview 12-15 elementary school teachers, but this was unsuccessful because of difficulties reaching interested participants. The subjects interviewed taught in unusual schools; one in a charter elementary school, and 7 in an alternative high school, which offered small classes and intensive individual attention. Missing was the opportunity to interview teachers working in a variety of school settings.

As it developed, due to the difficulties obtaining subjects, the ensuing time constraints restricted my subjects to eight teachers.

The time period in which I was carrying out my eight interviews was another limitation because, during the months of February, March and April 2008, teachers were busy preparing for vacations and meeting school deadlines. If more time were available, there may have been a chance for a stronger, more diverse cross-section of participants.

Another limitation concerned the scope of this study, which did not allow for an in-depth exploration of individual case histories; this information would have provided greater insight into the complex psychosocial issues of foster children and how the extent of their experiences, such as placement history, reason for being in foster care, and school histories, might affect their present level of functioning and ability to adapt and be resilient.

#### *Recommendations for Future Studies*

One area for future study could involve comparing how foster children are faring in traditional public schools versus alternative or charter schools. It would be valuable to interview school social workers to learn about their perceptions of foster children in the school system, how they assess teacher's ability to cope with this population, social services they offer, and recommendations for helping these children.

Another line of inquiry could involve foster parents, and learning of their perceptions of the children's school functioning, and services they feel their foster children need.

A serious shortcoming of this thesis study was my inability to interview foster students directly about their experiences in school. First-hand accounts by foster children

of what concerns, perceptions, and recommendations they hold regarding their school experiences would not only strengthen the research on this topic but may contribute insight into the issues which both affect their school adaptation and achievement as well as those factors which inhibit them achieving success.

### *Conclusion*

This study, while exploratory, does suggest that foster children will have the opportunity to do well when placed in an educational environment where learning is individualized and social competency is emphasized. It was observed that teachers who are responsive to their students needs can become an invaluable protective factor in their personal and educational growth and development. However, the success of teachers' efforts need to be examined in the context of children's psychological problems, adaptation, and capacity to relate as well as their backgrounds including early parenting, loss, trauma, abuse, foster home placements, and school history.

The findings from this study also suggest that working with foster children can be both rewarding and at times tiring, frustrating, and draining, even when teachers are being supportive and attentive, as these study participants were. Teachers need proper training and ongoing professional development to help them work with the "rejecting" child, as well the host of psychological and academic impairments children in foster care experience. In order for teachers to serve an ameliorative function, they need to have good training in working with foster children and with children who have emotional/learning problems. Teachers also need strong support in the school system and have access to appropriate resources.

Social work, as a profession, can contribute to teacher education and collaboration within the school system, enhancing the foster child's educational experience.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Guide

---

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_ Finish Time: \_\_\_\_\_

---

#### **Demographics and Introduction**

1. Could you provide the following demographic information about yourself?
  - a. age:
  - b. gender:
  - c. ethnicity: (optional)

#### **Educational and employment background**

2. What degree [degrees] do you hold?
3. What was your major in college? If advanced degree, in what field?
4. How many years have you taught?
5. Have you had previous experience with foster children other than in your role as a teacher?
6. Have you had other human service experiences in addition to teaching?
7. Number or approximate number of foster children you have had in your classes over the years?

#### **Classroom composition**

8. Do you have foster children this year? If yes, how many?

9. Did you have any foster children last year? If yes, how many?

**IF SUBJECT TAUGHT FOSTER CHILDREN ONLY IN THE PRESENT YEAR**

**ASK THESE QUESTIONS:**

- a. Are you teaching in a regular or charter elementary school?
- b. Is your class a regular class or special education class?
- c. What grade do you teach?
- d. How many students do you have in your class?

**IF SUBJECT TAUGHT FOSTER CHILDREN ONLY IN THE PAST YEAR ASK**

**THESE QUESTIONS:**

- a. Did you teach in a regular or charter elementary school?
- b. Was your class a regular class or special education class?
- c. What grade did you teach?
- d. How many students did you have in your class?

**IF SUBJECT TAUGHT FOSTER CHILDREN BOTH YEARS ASK THESE**

**QUESTIONS:**

- a. Are you currently teaching in a regular or charter elementary school? Last year did you teach in a regular or charter elementary school?
- b. Is your current class a regular class or special education class? Last year did you teach a regular class or special education class?
- c. What grade do you currently teach? What grade did you teach last year?
- d. Currently, how many students do you have in your class? How many students did you have in your class last year?

**Classroom experiences**

*Foster children vary and your experiences with them might also vary. With this in mind, can you please answer the following:*

10. How did you learn of your student's [students'] foster care status?
11. Do you believe other children in your class are aware when a student is [or students are] a foster child? If so, how do they respond to this awareness?
12. Does the subject of family life and/or family diversity ever come up in class? For example, divorce, family composition, blended families, family holidays, family vacations.
13. Do you notice that foster children react differently to this particular subject matter than other students? If so, how?
14. Does the subject of family diversity receive attention within the school? If so, describe how.
15. Describe the social interactions between the foster child [or foster children] and other students, and with you as their teacher.
16. When you have parent teacher conferences do you meet with the child's [or children's] foster parents, the biological parents, or both?
17. Are these conferences different in any way from conferences with parents of non-foster children?
18. Do you have any contact with the school social worker, child welfare or other agencies on behalf of your foster student [or students]? If so, please describe.

### **School Performance**

*Can you please describe your experiences with the following:*

19. From your perspective, as compared to other children in your class, have you noticed the foster child [or children] present any particular difficulties either academically, behaviorally, or socially?
20. How do you think the foster child is [or foster children are] faring academically as compared with other students in your class? For example, above, below, or at grade level? What do you attribute this to?
21. As compared to other children in your class, does the foster child [or do foster children] present particular strengths?
22. Do you think that there are any special challenges for foster children within the school system?
23. Have you experienced any special satisfactions in working with a foster child [or foster children]?
24. What type of help/services do you think these children need, if any? Are they able to access these resources through the school?
25. Have you been able to develop any effective strategies in dealing with some of these challenges? If so, what were these strategies? Was help available to you within the school system to deal with special challenges?

### **Recommendations**

26. Do you feel teachers could benefit from some orientation to working with foster children? If yes, what would you recommend be included in this orientation?
27. Do you feel teachers could benefit from training to work with children with emotional and/or educational problems? If yes, what would you recommend be included in this training?

28. Do you have any recommendations regarding how foster children could be supported in school?

**Ending questions**

29. If you have had other experiences teaching foster children prior to the past 2 years, are there any memories you would like to share of these experiences?

30. Is there anything we haven't discussed that you would like to share?

31. Do you have any additional questions, comments, and/or concerns?

32. How did you feel about this interview?

## Appendix B

### Letter of Invitation

*Please note this will be my first form of contact with all individuals.*

December 10, 2007

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Lynda Bonneau and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I was referred to you by \_\_\_\_\_ because I am conducting a study for my master's thesis, to explore the school experiences of foster children in Rhode Island as seen through the eyes of their elementary school teachers. The purpose of this study is to gain insight into their school experiences. As teachers who work with these children on a daily basis, you are in a unique position to provide insight into their school experiences, and the special challenges and rewards they may present in their classrooms, and in the school system. Your views about whether special services at school and/or in the community are needed, as well as whether you have developed specific strategies in working with these children will provide valuable information.

If you are interested in participating in this study, you should be currently working in either a regular or charter public elementary school, and presently have or have had a foster child or children in your classroom within the last two years. Additionally, you must have primary responsibility for one class and be with that class for most of the day.

I will call in a few days to discuss whether you might be interested in participating, and, if so, I will explain in greater detail about the study, and answer any questions you may have. If you choose to become a subject, I will ask you to participate

in a one-hour face-to-face confidential interview with me, and we can schedule a convenient date, time, and location for this interview. This one interview is the only time requested from participants.

If you become a participant I will send you the informed consent form prior to the interview.

Thank you for thinking about this important subject, and I shall look forward to talking with you soon.

Sincerely,

Lynda Bonneau

## Appendix C

### Informational Phone Call

#### Section I

*This is an outline of what my preliminary phone call will look like with all potential participants of my study. Please note that this will be my second form of contact with all individuals and this phone call outline is subject to change depending on the response from the potential participant.*

- 1.) I will call during service hours, introduce myself (my name; Smith SSW) and refer to letter of invitation (see Appendix B).
- 2.) Briefly re-acquaint individual with my thesis topic and reason for contacting him/her & mention referral source.
- 3.) Ask questions to gather more information about this potential participant (e.g. Do you teach in a public elementary school? Have you ever had a foster child in your class? Do you teach in a regular or charter school?)
- 4.) Ask individual if he/she is interested in participating in my study-

IF NO- Thank the person for his/her time; maybe ask for referral to another potential participant and end phone call.

IF YES- Move onto Question 5 and the “Recruitment” Phone Call Phase (Section II, below)

- 5.) Clarify recruitment requirements with individual, which were mentioned in letter of invitation, and which were not already discussed (Ask if he or she has primary responsibility for one class and is with that class most of the day).
-

## Section II

*This is a brief outline of what my phone conversation will look like when talking with an individual who has verbally agreed to participate in my study. Please note that this outline is subject to change depending on the response from the participant.*

- 1.) Greeting (ONLY if this is the call-back to the individual who has agreed to participate in my study).
- 2.) Explain in further detail the requirements of the participant in my study, including time, tape recording of interview, and note taking.
- 3.) Ask participant if there are any questions about the study at this time.
- 4.) Schedule interview date, time, and location
- 5.) Request mailing address from participant where a confirmation letter/email along with a copy of the Consent Form (see Appendix F), will be sent for their review and records. Ask participant to fill out Consent Form and bring it with him/her to the interview.
- 6.) Ensure participant of my protecting confidentiality throughout the entirety of his/her participation in this study.
- 7.) Ask participant if there are any further questions or concerns at this time.

Thank participant and end conversation.

## Appendix D

### Approval Letter from the Human Subjects Review Committee

December 18, 2007

Dear Lynda,

Your amended materials have been reviewed and you did a fine job of revision. All is now in order and we are happy to give your very interesting and useful study our final approval. You did a nice job of revising the questionnaire, asking questions that are more pointed and specific that the teachers can really answer, as you say, “from their perspective”.

*Please note the following requirements:*

**Consent Forms:** All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

**Maintaining Data:** You must retain signed consent documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

*In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:*

**Amendments:** If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

**Renewal:** You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

**Completion:** You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Good luck with your project.

Sincerely,

Ann Hartman, D.S.W.  
Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee  
CC: Esther Urdang, Research Advisor

## Appendix E

### Flyer

#### **CALLING ALL SCHOOL TEACHERS!**

*I am conducting a study for my master's thesis to explore the school experiences of foster children as observed by their school teachers.*

#### **WHO:**

I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work and I am looking for school teachers of any grade who have [or have had] a foster child [or children] in their classroom within the last three years to participate in my study.

#### **WHY:**

As teachers who work with these children on a daily basis, you are in a unique position to provide insight into their school experiences and the special challenges and rewards they may present in their classrooms, and in the school system.

#### **WHAT:**

If you choose to become a subject I will ask you to participate in a one-hour face-to-face confidential interview with me and we can schedule a convenient date, time, and location for this interview. *This one hour interview is the only time requested from participants.*

#### **WHEN:**

If you are interested in participating in this study please respond to this email with your name, number, and a convenient time to contact you. I will respond in the next few days

to introduce myself and describe the study in greater detail. If you have any questions feel free to call or e-mail me.

**If you know anybody who might fit the stated criteria and would be interested in participating in this study, please feel free to forward this e-mail along**

Thank you for your time.

## Appendix F

### Informed Consent Form

March 15, 2008

Dear Research Participant,

My name is Lynda Bonneau and I am a graduate student at Smith College School for Social Work. I am conducting a study to explore the school experiences of foster children in Rhode Island as seen through the eyes of their elementary school teachers. The focus of this study is to learn more about teachers' perceptions of their total school experiences, including their academic, social, and behavioral functioning and to also learn how teachers cope with and process the challenges presented by these children. As teachers who work with these children on a daily basis, you are in a unique position to provide insight into their school experiences, and the special challenges they may present in their classrooms, and in the school system. Your views about whether special services at school and/or in the community are needed, as well as whether you have developed specific strategies in working with these children will provide valuable information. Through this study I hope to deepen understanding of how educators can help foster children achieve success and build strong adult and peer relationships that will increase their resiliency and future success. This study is being conducted as my thesis for the Master of Social Work degree at Smith College School for Social Work and its subsequent use may include presentation and publication.

Your participation is requested because you are a teacher within the elementary school system. If you are interested in participating in this study, you should be currently

working either in a regular or a charter public elementary school and presently have or have had a foster child or children in your classroom within the last two years.

Additionally, you must have primary responsibility for one class and be with that class for most of the day. As a subject in this study you will be asked to participate in a one-hour face-to-face interview. Questions will focus on your observations of, and thoughts and feelings about working with this population. Interviews will be tape recorded, which I will later transcribe myself; tapes will be coded numerically to ensure your confidentiality.

Minimal risk to you of emotional discomfort or stress from participation in this study is anticipated, as interviews will not require personal information from you.

Your participation is voluntary. You will receive no financial benefit for your participation in this study. However, you may benefit from knowing that your participation may impact future interventions geared towards supporting foster children and the teachers who work them. In addition, involvement in this study will give you the opportunity to voice your personal opinions, concerns, and experiences regarding caring for and educating foster children. It is my hope that this study will enhance the knowledge of educators regarding the needs of foster children within the school system as well as suggesting intervention strategies.

Every effort will be made to ensure the confidentiality of your participation. Your name and all identifying information will be removed from the data collected. Your signed informed consent form will be kept separate from the other materials. All informed consents, tapes and all data will be kept in a secure place for 3-years, according to federal guidelines, after which time I will destroy them. If I should need these records

beyond three years, I will continue to keep them secure until they are no longer needed, at which time I will destroy them. My research advisor will have access to the interview data after identifying information has been removed.

If I use interview material for presentations or publications within the 3-year time frame, the utmost care will be taken so that subjects will not be identified. In the written thesis, and in any written work, I will not use demographic information to describe each individual; rather I will combine the demographic data to reflect the subject pool in the aggregate. If illustrative vignettes are presented, they will be in a disguised form.

This study is completely voluntary. You are free to refuse to answer specific interview question(s) and to withdraw from the study at any time without repercussion. If you decide to withdraw, all data pertaining to you will be immediately destroyed. You have until April 20, 2008 to withdraw from the study; after this date I will begin writing the Results and Discussion sections of my thesis.

You can contact me in case you have any additional questions or wish to withdraw by using my contact information at the bottom of the form. If you have any concerns about your rights or any aspect of the study, you are encouraged to call Dr. Ann Hartmann, Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee at (413) 585-7974.

I look forward to having you as part of my research study and thank you for your participation.

**YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND THE ABOVE INFORMATION AND THAT YOU HAVE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT THE STUDY, YOUR**

**PARTICIPATION, AND YOUR RIGHTS AND THAT YOU AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.**

Signature of participant:

Date:

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Please mail this consent form in the stamped addressed return envelope to indicate your intention of participating in the study. I have included two copies of the Consent form as I suggest that you keep one copy for your records. If I do not hear from you within the next couple weeks, I will follow up with a telephone call.

If you have any further questions about this study, participation, rights of participants, or this consent form, please feel free to ask me at the contact information below. Thank you for your time, and I greatly look forward to having you as a participant in my study.

Sincerely,

Lynda Bonneau