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Danielle Walker
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ADULTS FORMERLY IN FOSTER CARE

NARRATE SCHOOLING EXPERIENCES

by

DANIELLE WALKER

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

Adults Formerly in Foster Care Narrate Schooling Experiences

by

Danielle Walker

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Adults Formerly in Foster Care Narrate Schooling Experiences

by

Danielle Walker

Advisor: Colette Daiute

Roughly 400,000 children are in foster care in the United States (Lash, 2017, p. 5). These youth are less likely to graduate high school than their non-foster peers (Barnow et al., 2015). While several barriers contribute to the poor educational outcomes for children in foster care, research has noted that the label "foster child" is associated with negative connotations and differential teacher treatment (Altshuler, 2003; Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002). In spite of such observations, little research has emphasized the perspectives of those in foster care. To fill this gap, this qualitative study posed the following question: How do adults formerly in foster care perceive teacher treatment and expectations of students in foster care versus students who are not in foster care? Participants who were 18 years old or older and were in the foster care system were recruited with flyers distributed via snowball sampling. Adults formerly in foster care are in relevant positions to reflect on their own, their group's, and their peers' experiences in school. Participants were invited to contribute to a WordPress site, a platform for creating blogs, designed for this study. On the site, participants blogged in response to two narrative vignettes about school events including children in foster care. Additionally, participants interacted and commented on the blog posts to compare their recalled schooling experiences with others' experiences and with the vignette responses. Character mapping was used to analyze the blog posts and blog comments. The analysis showed a dichotomy between the student in foster care

who was presented in a more negative light academically and behaviorally and the student not in

care who was presented in a more positive light. It was also found that the participants connected

with the fictional third-person narratives by using the "I" perspective. This project highlighted

the potential stigma surrounding children in foster care and the importance of using narrative

methodology.

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Introduction

In 2016, over 84% of students in the United States graduated on time (Balingit, 2017). Despite the overall high school graduation rate increasing (Balingit, 2017), gaps still exist between foster youth and their non-foster peers. "Only 50% of the 400,000 foster care children in the United States complete high school by age 18" (Lahey, 2014) and "by age 24, only 6% have completed a 2-year or 4-year degree" (Rymph, 2017, p. 2). Because children in foster care are disproportionately at risk of dropping out of high school and not attending college, it is important to research the topic of foster care and education to help improve outcomes for these youth.

This study examined how the label "foster child" has impacted the schooling experiences of adults formerly in foster care. In the next sections of this paper, the stigma attached to those in foster care is traced back to the history of the foster care system in the United States. Before describing the present study's purpose and methods, relevant literature on the educational barriers for foster children is presented. The paper ends with results from this study and implications for researchers and educators who are interested in the education of children in foster care.

History of Foster Care in the United States

Although the usage of the term "foster care" has changed over time, it is loosely defined as the placement of children outside of their biological homes (Rymph, 2017). Foster care can be traced back to the colonial era in which children from various social classes, particularly those from the lower class, were indentured to masters. Children worked in others' homes while the masters provided the children with basic needs and taught them a trade (Rymph, 2017). Indenture valued labor over a parental bond (Rymph, 2017).

As the practice of indenture faded, orphanages were on the rise. "By 1880, there were over 600 orphanages in the United States serving more than 50,000 children" (Rymph, 2017, p. 19). Most orphanages began as private and religious-based institutions, which meant that they could turn away children. African American children were often excluded from these institutions (Rymph, 2017). Children living in orphanages were not always orphans; many children came from lower socioeconomic families and families who lacked the ability to care for their children.

Some child welfare advocates were against institutions and believed that "the best place for a child is a good home" (Hacsi, 1995). In 1853, Charles Brace established the New York Children's Aid Society to place children with families (Hacsi, 1995). Brace believed that "children should be protected from the urban environment and from their own parents, who were presumed to be unworthy individuals incapable of rearing children properly" (Hacsi, 1995). As a result, homeless children in cities were put on trains and sent to live mostly in rural areas, where sometimes they would work without pay.

Groups of children traveled on the trains with agents. Advertisements titled "Homes Wanted for Children" were placed in towns to inform people about the trains' arrival (Figure 1). Children were lined up and told to appear likeable, so potential parents could view them and determine which children would best contribute to their household (Jalongo, 2010). A train rider recalled, "They put us all on a big platform in some big building while people came from all around the countryside to pick out those of us they wished to take home" (Holt, 1994, p. 41). If children were not chosen, they would ride the train to the next stop until they found a family (Jalongo, 2010).

Figure 1. Newspaper advertisement for orphan train riders. This figure illustrates the time and

place where people in the town could view the orphan train riders and offer them homes (Holt,

1994).

The movement was criticized because foster families were not screened. Therefore, not all rural families were considered "good homes" (Hacsi, 1995). The orphan trains stopped running in the 1920s (Jalongo, 2010). Soon after, the government became more involved, and the state was responsible for screening and paying families who took in children. The practice of providing stipends to families, known as boarding-out, emerged into the modern-day foster care system.

With the rise of the social work profession and the recognition of child abuse, more children were placed into foster care (Hacsi, 1995). The foster care system today tries to keep children with their biological families rather than moving them across the country (Hacsi, 1995). However, children who are neglected and abused are often removed from their biological parents.

Children may be placed into different types of foster care arrangements: nonkin foster care, kinship care, and institutional and group homes (Bartholet, 1999). Kinship care is the placement of children in private homes with relatives or those who know the child, while nonkin care is the placement of children with foster parents who do not have a prior relationship with the child. Institutional and groups homes are run by staff and house numerous foster youth. The length of time children are in care varies, but they "spend an average of from three and a half to five and a half years in out-of-home-care" (Bartholet, 1999, p. 82).

Stigma of being in Foster Care

Stigma is described as "circumstances when one identifies and labels differences in others and forms a negative stereotype about the members of that particular group" (Lovi & Barr, 2009, p. 167). Often, it is used to distinguish between those who are "normal" and those who are

"abnormal." People can be stigmatized for reasons such as sexual orientation, disabilities, weight, and family background.

Stigma toward foster youth has been present since the founding of orphanages. As mentioned previously, orphanages were selective in who they let in to their institutions. Most orphanages served mainly white, well-behaved children. Private institutions often denied children who were black, disruptive, or disabled, and stigmatized them as "undeserving" (Smith, 1995). For those who were accepted, conditions in the orphanages were often poor, and children were provided with the bare minimum of essentials. This resulted in some institutionalized children being treated as "unfortunate objects of charity" (Smith, 1995).

In general, the use of orphanages declined because of the stigma associated with institutions. Attachment theorists like John Bowlby argued that infants need to form a bond with their parents, specifically their mother. An attachment between a mother and child fosters healthy development. Thus, those in institutions were considered "damaged" because they were separated from their parents (Rymph, 2017).

Stigma continued during the Orphan Train Movement. Brace felt threatened by the immigrants who fled to the cities, and described the children as the "dangerous classes" (Lash, 2017, p. 19). He believed that they would "poison society all around them" and would "help to form the great multitude of robbers, thieves, and vagrants" (Lash, 2017, p. 20). The stigma of being described as criminal followed children to their new schools, towns, and families. Some reported feeling "ashamed that they had been 'train riders'" (Warren, 2001, p. 13).

The implementation of boarding out has fostered a notion that money is the main motivation for individuals to become foster parents. A foster parent was found saying, "You're not my child, I don't care what's going on with you, as long as you're not dead, I'll continue to

get my paycheck" (Lash, 2017, p. 78). Although caregivers receive a small stipend for fostering children, there is a stereotype that all foster parents do it for the money. In turn, children's self-worth may be tied to financial worth.

Over time, there have been two major shifts in who goes into care and how they are viewed. In the past, poverty was the main reason for children going into foster care. While poverty is still associated with entering foster care, there are now many individuals who attribute the reason to pathology. There is a perception that poor families are to blame and that they are "disorganized" (Rymph, 2017, p. 116). This deficit thinking leads to the notion that all children in foster care are considered "sick" and "bring damage with them" (Rymph, 2017, p. 120) because they are "products of the pathological home environment" (Lash, 2017, p. 46).

The next shift has to do with race. Previously, foster care was designed to help white families while excluding black ones. More recently, black children are overrepresented in foster care. Families of color are more likely to come into contact with the foster care system because they are stigmatized as unfit parents (Lash, 2017). This stigma trickles down to the children in the classroom. Black children in foster care are frequently labeled with "serious emotional disturbance," and therefore placed into special education classes (Lash, 2017, p. 46). This leads to additional stigma, which further impacts their educational experiences and achievement rates.

It is important to recognize the intersection between race and class. Poor families of color face more stigma than middle-class families and white families. Society tends to think that it is more beneficial to have white, middle-class families raise children of color from lower-class backgrounds (Lash, 2017). It has been argued that foster care is "an institution designed to monitor, regulate, and punish poor black families" (Rymph, 2017, p. 125).

Educational Barriers for Foster Youth

The history of the foster care system and the stigma associated with being in care shed some light on the challenges faced by foster youth. In addition to stigma, several factors may serve as educational barriers for foster youth: placement mobility and school transfers, poverty, trauma, and caregiver involvement. All of these factors are important and are likely to contribute both independently and together to influence the achievement rates of students in foster care. While this section emphasizes the risk factors of dropping out of school, it is important to note that many foster youth are resilient and go on to lead meaningful lives (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Placement mobility and school transfers. "Students in foster care move schools at least once or twice a year, and by the time they age out of the system, over one third will have experienced five or more school moves" (Lahey, 2014). Changing schools forces students to adapt to new environments and makes it more difficult for them to form lasting relationships with teachers and peers. Instability may affect children's performance in school.

Evidence shows that transferring schools harms students in foster care. Zima et al. (2000) studied 302 foster youth between 6 and 12 years old in California. Twenty-eight percent of the sample experienced five or more placement changes and 36% of the participants attended two or more schools (Zima et al., 2000). Some participants reported attending up to nine different schools (Zima et al., 2000). The study found a positive relationship between mobility and academic skill delays; participants with a higher number of placements performed extremely low on at least one reading or math assessment.

Changing schools can also lead to delays in transferring records. Zetlin, Weinberg, and Luderer (2004) attempted to access the school records of 120 foster youth. As a result of frequent school changes, it took Zetlin et al. (2004) between 3 weeks to 8 months to retrieve the records.

They found that the majority of records were missing information. For instance, only 56% of the records contained grades and transcripts (Zetlin et al., 2004). If information is missing, it is possible that students will have to repeat classes and/or will not receive the services needed for their Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

The studies cited above focused on foster youth specifically, but research pertaining to a more general student population has found similar evidence. One study, by the United States General Accounting Office (GAO), analyzed a nationally representative sample of third-graders. In its 1994 report, the GAO discovered that third-graders who had not changed schools thus far in their academic careers were less likely to be below grade level in reading and math than those who changed schools three or more times. Thus, third-graders who changed schools frequently were more at risk of repeating a grade (GAO, 1994).

In a more recent study, Heinlein and Shinn (2000) collected data from 764 sixth-grade students' records. They found that sixth-grade achievement was lower for students who had moved schools three or more times; however, after controlling for third-grade achievement, mobility did not affect achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000). According to Heinlein and Shinn (2000), mobility may be more harmful during the first few years of school. While this claim is supported by the GAO report, future research should consider testing this finding further.

Poverty. Families from low socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to encounter foster care professionals and foster care (Lash, 2017). "In Wisconsin in 2008, a child living in poverty was 6 times as likely to be involved with the system" (Lash, 2017, p. 6). Connell, Bergeron, Katz, Saunders, and Tebes (2007) examined the characteristics of about 22,000 cases that influence risk of re-referral to Child Protective Services. They found that poverty was strongly related to re-referral. Forty percent of the sample included low-socioeconomic status

families, and these families were at a 325% greater risk of re-referral to Child Protective Services (Connell et al., 2007). Parents with low incomes possess fewer resources to meet their children's basic needs, which results in a significant percentage of children entering foster care.

The chronic stress associated with poverty and being in the foster care system affects children's everyday lives. Almeida (2005) used diary methods to determine how vulnerable individuals are to stressors, meaning daily challenges. In diary methods, participants logged their stressors, health, and emotional states over the telephone daily. All of the participants, regardless of socioeconomic status, claimed that stressors impacted their daily routines; however, individuals living in poverty reported that stressors had a more negative impact on their well-being (Almeida, 2005). This has important implications for foster youth and their experiences in the classroom.

Many foster children reported feeling distracted during school. One child said:

You have to worry about where your parents are and what they're doing. And you have to worry about your schoolwork at the same time. It is hard . . . They told me that my mother is using drugs, and I knew it, and I worry about her. Is she still using drugs? Does she have any problems? (Finkelstein, Wamsley, & Miranda, 2002, p. 18)

Another student also had difficulty focusing in class:

I don't even remember what I learned—no, let me rephrase that—I don't remember what they tried to teach me—after fifth grade. It wasn't until I had a stable home and was taken in by a loving family in tenth grade that I was able to hear anything, to learn anything. Before that, I wasn't thinking about science, I was thinking about what I was going to eat that day or where I could get clothes. When I was finally in one place for a while, going

to the same school, everything changed. Even my handwriting improved. I could focus. I

was finally able to learn. (Lahey, 2014)

These outside distractions make it more difficult for foster youth to concentrate in school.

Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are less likely to experience distractions to the

same degree, so they can put school first. On the other hand, foster children may be more

concerned with their personal and family well-being; hence, their grades suffer.

Overall, a large body of literature has found a connection between class and academic

success. Before school even begins, children from low-socioeconomic status families are at a

disadvantage compared to more privileged children. In their famous book, Hart and Risley

(1995) found that welfare parents interacted less with their toddlers than middle-class parents.

Middle-class parents spoke about 2,100 words to their children per hour, while welfare parents

spoke about 600 words (Hart & Risley, 1995). Thus, children from middle-class families had

more vocabulary growth, which led to achievement differences among the groups of children

(Hart & Risley, 1995).

Class differences continue through middle and high school. Gordon and Cui (2016)

studied a nationally representative sample of teenagers to examine the effects of community-

level poverty on achievement rates. They discovered that adolescents living in high-poverty

communities had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than those in low-poverty communities

(Gordon & Cui, 2016). On a more individual level, Gordon and Cui (2016) found that teenagers

whose parents had some college and who earned higher incomes had significantly better GPAs

than teenagers with less-educated parents.

Trauma. Traumatic events, defined as experiences that cause distress, are fairly common among foster youth (Riebschleger, Day, & Damashek, 2015). After using national data to study the well-being of children in the foster care system, Kortenkamp and Macomber (2002) found that trauma was linked to emotional and behavioral problems. However, about 32% of children did not receive any mental health services (Kortenkamp & Macomber, 2002). Kortenkamp and Macomber (2002) also found that foster youth were less engaged in school and participated in fewer extracurricular activities.

According to Riebschleger et al. (2015), foster children may be exposed to traumatic events before, during, and after their placements in the foster care system. Examples of trauma shared by youth before entering the system included, "I have been raped, beaten, sold and some by my own mother, brothers and sisters," and "my family . . . my blood . . . put me in the system because she didn't want to deal with me" (Riebschleger et al., 2015, p. 9).

In the study by Riebschleger (2015), children also described traumatic events that occurred in foster care. One child reported the following:

> I experienced sexual abuse in a foster home that I resided in for 2 years. . . . I ran from the home and what was reported in my case file was I was dysfunctional, something was wrong with me . . . and I was the victim. (Riebschleger et al., 2015, p. 11)

It is important to note that not all foster youth experience traumatic events during foster care; however, for some, traumatic experiences follow them for the rest of their lives.

Traumatic events can affect student performance. Sitler (2009) described how traumatic events affected the educational experiences of two children, Laurie and Will. When Laurie first joined the class, the teacher thought she was lazy, until the teacher learned that Laurie's parents had filed for divorce. According to Sitler (2009), Laurie was using a defense mechanism called

freezing, where Laurie did nothing to solve her family situation and also did not complete any schoolwork. On the other hand, Will was aggressive as a result of having to take care of his family after his mom became sick with cancer. This study shows that trauma can affect how students behave in school. Teachers should receive appropriate training, so they can best address the needs of these children.

Childhood trauma is also related to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Kolko et al. (2010) examined the frequency of posttraumatic stress (PTS) symptoms in a sample of 1,848 children who were referred to Child Protective Services. Kolko et al. (2010) found that about 11% of the sample reported significant PTS symptoms. Qureshi et al. (2011) reviewed 21 studies to determine the effects of PTSD on cognitive performance. They found that numerous studies discovered a relationship between PTSD and poor ability to pay attention (Qureshi et al., 2011). If children have difficulty paying attention in school, this could affect their performance.

Caregiver involvement. Studies have reported mixed evidence on the role of caregivers in foster children's education. In one study, Blome (1997) compared the educational outcomes of foster youth with children not in the system. She found that foster youth were significantly more likely to drop out of high school compared to children raised with their biological parents (Blome, 1997). This finding may be linked to the level of support foster youth received from families. Both foster mothers and fathers were less likely than their biological counterparts to check their students' homework (Blome, 1997). In addition, 65% of foster youth reported that caregivers did not attend teacher conferences and 70% said that caregivers did not volunteer at school (Blome, 1997). This study suggests that caregiver involvement among foster youth is relatively low. However, this study used a relatively small sample size, so this finding cannot be generalized to all foster youth.

In a more recent study by Beisse and Tyre (2013), foster parents completed a survey by rating their involvement in various activities. Beisse and Tyre (2013) found that about 80% of the sample of caregivers reported monitoring the children's homework and asking about their grades almost every day. Despite being actively involved at home, only about 20% of caregivers reported that they participated in school activities most of the time. Schools should aim to encourage parent and caregiver involvement.

While few studies have focused on caregiver involvement among foster children, numerous researchers have expressed the importance of parental involvement in education. In order to determine the association between parental involvement and the achievement rates of middle and high school students, Jeynes (2007) conducted a meta-analysis of 52 relevant studies. Jeynes (2007) found that parental involvement was positively related to academic success across all races. He also discovered that parental expectations influenced achievement rates more than other components of parental involvement (Jeynes, 2007). Because Jeynes (2007) analyzed the data of about 300,000 individuals, this study provides strong evidence that parental involvement influences student performance.

Stigma. The stigma youth in foster care face has the ability to influence their educational experiences. Studies have consistently found that the label "foster child" is associated with negative connotations in the school setting. Altshuler (2003) held separate focus groups with students, educators, and caseworkers. Participants agreed that the label "foster child" is connected with undesirable traits (Altshuler, 2003). For instance, teachers believed that all foster youth have behavioral problems (Altshuler, 2003). In addition, students reported that teachers treated them differently and would give them extra time to complete their work (Altshuler, 2003).

In another study, Finkelstein et al. (2002) conducted interviews with foster children, school staff, caseworkers, and foster parents. Teachers were hesitant to acknowledge that foster children had different experiences from other students in the school (Finkelstein et al., 2002). One teacher said, "I consider a teenager a teenager. . . I treat them all the same" (Finkelstein et al., 2002). It seemed that the teachers wanted to appear favorably, so it was difficult to determine how this sample of teachers behaved toward foster youth. It is possible that the teachers did not attach a negative label to foster youth or that they were not always aware of the children's status in foster care.

Martin and Jackson (2002) studied a sample of high achievers previously in the foster care system. They asked participants to comment on the stereotypes they experienced in foster care. One participant said:

> I think in terms of the stigma attached to being in care, lack of opportunities available, they are automatically seen as being underachievers anyway. Trouble makers as well . . . I remember somebody saying to me "You're in care because you're naughty" and it's like you're immediately set up to fail. (Martin & Jackson, 2002, p. 126)

Another participant stated:

> I think we have to get across to the pupil that the fact that they are in care makes no difference to their educational ability. I think there is a sort of mind set which says because you are in care you are not actually going to achieve or do very much. (Martin & Jackson, 2002, p. 126)

There is this notion that being in foster care is associated with being a delinquent or underachiever. As a result, foster youth have reported feeling embarrassed and not wanting their

classmates to know about their status in foster care (Finkelstein et al., 2002). In one study, children talked about being bullied by those who knew they were in care:

> People that I've just met have been quite insensitive and . . . be like, "It's a bit weird you don't live with your parents. Do they hate you?" (Farmer, Selwyn, & Meakings, 2013, p. 28)

> It was something like, "You're not normal because you don't live with your parents." (Farmer et al., 2013, p. 28)

This shows that students' status in foster care has a negative influence on how these students are treated by peers in addition to how they are treated by teachers.

Present Study

Thus far, only a few researchers have examined teacher expectations and treatment toward students in foster care. These studies used focus group and interview methodology. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, participants may be reluctant to disclose their stories in front of other participants and researchers. The current study asked participants to reflect on their own experiences while also responding to fictional prompts. Individuals may be more comfortable sharing their experiences through the lens of other characters in hypothetical scenarios.

Theoretical Framework

The current study integrated labeling theory and narrative inquiry as frameworks for studying foster children's educational experiences. A caseworker said, "The fact that he is in foster care is going to impact every single thing that the child does during the school day" (Altshuler, 2003). This suggests that the label "foster child" strongly shapes a child's identity. Narrating allowed participants to explore how this label has influenced their role as students, their relationships with teachers, and their academic careers.

Labeling theory. Labeling theory can serve as a framework for studying power dynamics in school settings, and is often used as a framework for studying stigma. The labeling approach originated from Howard Becker's study of social deviance. According to Becker, deviance is a social process; society labels certain people's behaviors as deviant, which leads to a cascade of negative consequences (Rist, 2007). In most cases, dominant groups define deviance and label subordinate groups. Thus, labeling theorists are interested in the interaction between who labels and who gets labeled rather than the behavior itself. This emerges in the field of education when teachers label students on the basis of race, class, gender, appearance, or status in foster care.

Edwin Lemert's concepts of primary and secondary deviance influenced Becker's work. Primary deviance refers to an individual who has engaged in unethical behavior, but who is not considered deviant (Rist, 2007). Primary deviance shifts to secondary deviance once one is labeled and internalizes that label (Rist, 2007). This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy if the individual alters his or her behavior, so the label becomes true.

In the context of the classroom, labels can become self-fulfilling prophecies if students perform to teachers' expectations (Rist, 2007). For instance, if teachers expect more from students, then they ask students more challenging questions or give them more time to respond. These behaviors can positively impact students' academic performance. The same holds true when teachers expect less from students.

Several researchers have applied the labeling approach to the study of education. In a study by Rist (1970), kindergarten students were assigned to tables by their socioeconomic backgrounds. The teacher treated middle-class students as fast learners and students from welfare

families as slow learners (Rist, 1970). This shows that class, among other variables, influences

teachers' expectations of students within the first few days of school.

The study conducted by Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) inspired debate over the self-

fulfilling prophecy in the classroom. To explain the study, researchers administered an

intelligence test to elementary school students at the end of the school year. The following year,

teachers were given the names of students who would "bloom" academically based on their test

scores; however, names were chosen at random and did not actually reflect test scores. When the

test was administered again, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) found that the "bloomers" scored

higher than the other students.

Good and Brophy (1973) have argued that labeling does not always lead to a self-

fulfilling prophecy. For instance, teachers' expectations can change or students can resist labels

(Good & Brophy, 1973). In either of these cases, labels are unlikely to influence student

performance.

Related to the educational experiences of foster youth, labeling theory was applied as a

theoretical framework in the logic model below:
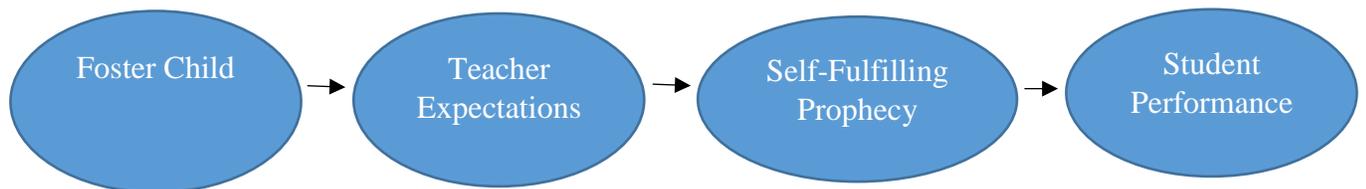
The label "foster child" influences teacher expectations, which can lead to self-fulfilling

prophecies if teachers treat foster youth differently from their peers. For instance, if teachers

associate foster children with being delinquents, then teachers may punish foster youth more than

other students. This example is portrayed in the following quote from a caseworker:

I have like kids who definitely have like done things wrong, but nothing, you know,

another child wouldn't have gotten in trouble for, but because this kid is in foster care, we

get called in immediately, and like come and deal with this. Come and pick this kid up.

Come and do this. Come and do that. So I mean some staff do discriminate. (Finkelstein

et al., 2002, p. 40)

Ultimately, the self-fulfilling prophecy can affect the academic performance of foster youth. It is

important to note that the current study did not explicitly measure student performance; however,

achievement is crucial to highlight in the model because student labels and teacher attitudes can

contribute to the achievement gap between students who are in foster care and those who are not.

Narrative inquiry.

Narrators recount experiences and tell stories to solve problems, to make friends, to

pursue opportunities, to live good lives. This sense-making function of narrating involves

using narratives as a tool to figure out what is going on in the environment, how one fits,

and how situations might be better. (Daiute, 2014, p. 33)

This above quote illustrates how important and useful narrating is in everyday life.

Narratives are frequently defined as stories, but they are so much more than that. Narrating is an

activity used by individuals to make sense of and to interact with the world (Daiute, 2014).

In addition to labeling theory, this study utilized narrative inquiry as a means to shift the

perspective from those who label to individuals who might be the subjects of labels. Narrating

was used as a medium for adults formerly in care to recall important memories and to think

about their place in the school. Drawing from a study by Kreniske (2017) in which students

blogged about their transition to college, this current study encouraged participants to write and

share their narratives through blog posts and comments. This form of narrating gave adults formerly in foster care the chance to connect with others who have experienced foster care.

Narrative researchers are fascinated by how stories are told (Daiute, 2014). Characters are an important element of any story. Narrators come into contact with many people in their environment, so it is important to look at how these individuals create meaning in the narratives (Daiute, 2014). In this study, I was most concerned with the characters that appeared in the narratives. Characters such as teachers, peers, social workers, caregivers, and school administrators influenced and shaped the schooling experiences of adults formerly in foster care. Therefore, it was crucial to examine how the participants portrayed each person and made sense of their roles. This was done by using character mapping to analyze the narratives. Character mapping helped to answer the study's research questions because it painted a picture of how the narrators presented the student in foster care and the student not in care in relation to others in their lives.

Few researchers have used narrative inquiry to study foster youth. It is a useful method because people have the opportunity to narrate from different perspectives. For example, people can narrate through first-person or third-person perspectives. It has been found that authors may project their own thoughts and feelings onto third-person characters in an effort to distance themselves from what is being said (Daiute, 2014; Daiute, Todorova, & Kovács-Cerović, 2015). This project incorporated both first-person narratives that were autobiographical in nature and third-person narratives that were fictional in nature. The use of both types of narratives allowed adults formerly in foster care to recall past memories, interpret those memories, and tell them as they wished through multiple genres and character perspectives.

Aim of this Study

This study added to the body of literature on foster care and education by inviting those with first-hand experience of foster care to narrate schooling experiences. While past literature has considered the perspectives of teachers, social workers, and foster caregivers, the current study focused solely on the perspectives of those who were in foster care. A "goal of narrative reporting is to empower the voices of those who have been silenced or excluded" (Daiute, 2014, p. 10). This study afforded adults formerly in foster care the opportunity to interpret and express their own experiences and interactions in school.

The aim of this study was to explore how adults formerly in foster care told their educational experiences through first-person and third-person perspectives. The research questions guiding this study were "How do adults formerly in foster care perceive teacher treatment and expectations of students in foster care versus students who are not in foster care?" and "How do adults formerly in foster care use narratives to reenact their educational experiences?"

It was hypothesized that participants would position themselves and tell their stories in unique ways through third-person narratives (Daiute, 2014; Daiute et al., 2015). It was also hypothesized that the content of the narratives would suggest that teachers treat foster youth differently and have lower expectations for foster children compared to their non-foster peers (Altshuler, 2003; Finkelstein et al., 2002).

<div align="center">

Methods

</div>

This qualitative study utilized a narrative approach in a blog context to explore the educational experiences of former students who have experienced foster care. Blogs "provide a forum for 'ordinary people' to share their own perspectives and experiences" (Somolu, 2007, p.

478). Somolu (2007) examined the importance of blogging for African women. Somolu (2007) found that blogs were used as tools to empower women to express themselves and to connect with others.

In this study, blogs were used in similar ways. Through narrative writing, adults formerly in foster care were able to tell stories about what it was like to be both a student and a foster child. Participants were encouraged to read and comment on each other's blogs, so it was a powerful way for those who have experienced foster care to interact with others who have shared similar circumstances. This research was approved by the CUNY Human Research Protection Program.

Participants

The study sample consisted of participants who have experienced foster care. Participants were eligible if they were 18 years old or older and were in the foster care system. All adults who have spent time in foster care could participate, regardless of the reasons and age they entered foster care, the length of time in the system, or the type of foster care placement. It was important that the study encompassed a range of experiences in foster care.

It is difficult to find individuals who were in foster care because they are no longer in the system (Martin & Jackson, 2002). As a means to locate a large number of individuals, the goal was to recruit participants through organizations with affiliations to alumni of foster care. After many attempts to contact organizations, this recruitment method was unsuccessful. It is likely that these organizations were devoting their time and energies to improving foster care outcomes and services through the voices of those who were in care.

Instead, a snowball sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. A flyer was distributed to individuals who were in foster care and those with possible connections to foster

care alumni. My contact information was listed on the flyer for any who wished to participate. Initial participants recommended others who were in foster care to potentially take part in the study. Although participants referred people to the study, it was not disclosed to them whether the referred individuals chose to participate.

In total, nine people consented to participate in the study. Of those who consented, eight completed part one of the study and five completed part two. This resulted in 15 blog posts and 33 comments on the blog posts. This sample is not representative of all those who experienced foster care; however, the participants offered unique insights into some of their experiences.

Procedures

After consenting to take part in the study, participants received an introductory email asking them to create a WordPress account using a pseudonym instead of their actual name. Once they signed up for WordPress, the participants were invited to join the page, https://schoolingexperiences.wordpress.com/, a private WordPress website I designed and implemented for the study (Figure 2). Participants were invited as *Contributors* to the site. This meant that they were able to write and edit their own posts, but could not publish them.
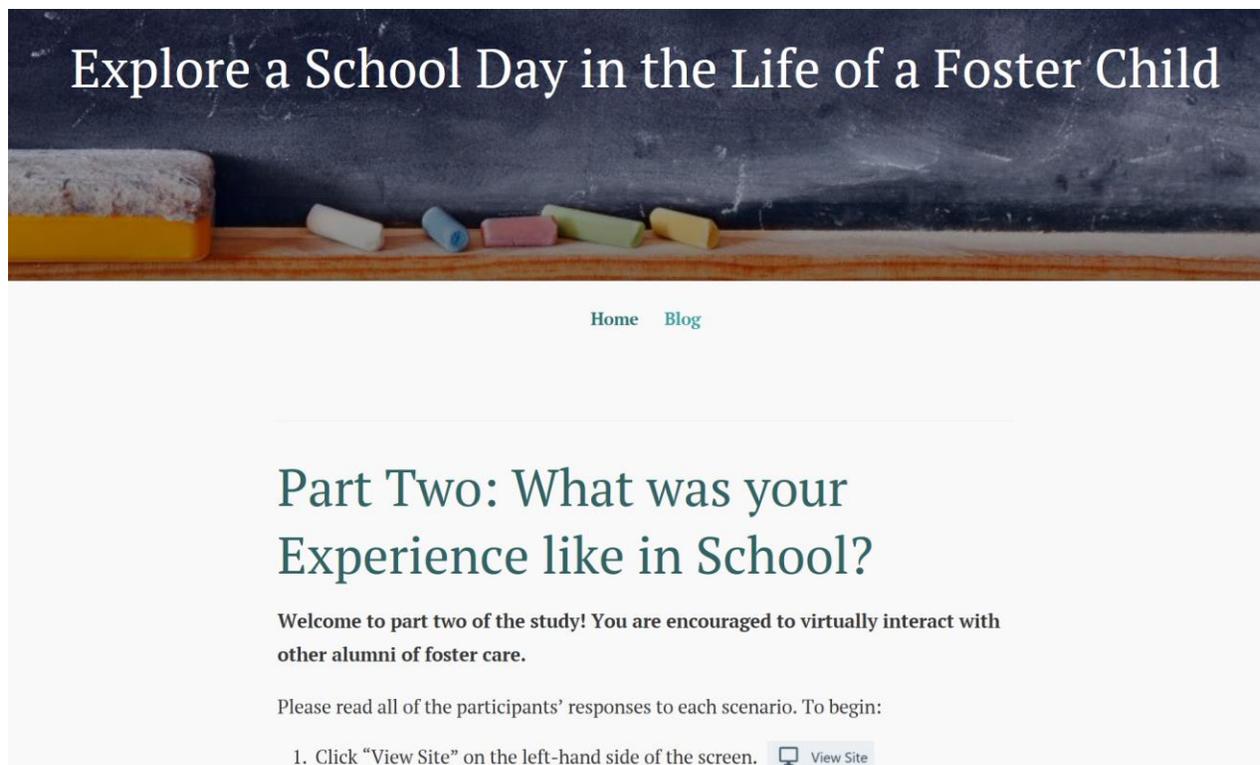
Figure 2. WordPress site. This figure illustrates the blog's homepage site with directions on how to complete part two of the study.

An email was sent to the participants informing them about part one of the study. During part one, participants had one week to respond to two fictional third-person narrative prompts on the WordPress site. Participants were encouraged to blog in one sitting to ensure that they responded to both of the following vignette prompts:

1. Brandon, a student in foster care, and Xavier, a student not in foster care, switch to a new sixth-grade classroom. Their new teacher, Ms. Albright, asks their old teacher, Mr. Kendall, about each student's behavioral and academic performance. How does Mr. Kendall describe Brandon and Xavier?

2. Alicia, a student in foster care, and Sophie, a student not in foster care, cheat on a math exam. Their seventh-grade teacher catches them cheating. What happens next?

Detailed instructions on how to navigate the WordPress site, create the posts, and submit them were found on the site's homepage.

When all participants were finished blogging, I, the *Admin*, published the posts to the site. The posts were published with no identifiers. The participants' pseudonym was linked to their blog posts.

After the posts were published, the participants received an email with directions about part two of the study. Using their pseudonym, the participants had an additional week to comment on each other's posts. Participants were instructed to comment on at least three responses to the first prompt and at least three to the second prompt. They wrote autobiographical narratives from the first-person perspective. The participants were given the following prompt:

> In your comments, describe a time in school where your experience was similar to or different from the students' experiences presented in the blog posts. You may also choose to compare your experiences to those experienced by other participants as provided in the comments.

Analysis

The purpose of this study was to illustrate how adults formerly in foster care depicted their educational experiences through the perspectives of various individuals inside and outside of the school context. In order to meet this purpose, character mapping was used to analyze the blog posts and blog comments. Character mapping is useful for determining the roles characters play in relation to each other and how these roles contribute to the narrative's meaning (Daiute, 2014). After reading each narrative a few times, Table 1 was used as a guide to explore characters' interactions.

Table 1

Character Map Organizer (based on Daiute, 2014)

CHARACTER MAP				
	Characters	Character Mentions	Actions	Psychological States
First-Person Singular				
First-Person Plural				
Second-Person Singular				
Second-Person Plural				
Third-Person Singular				
Third-Person Plural				

Characters and character mentions. In each narrative, characters including perspectives and numbers were observed. Examples of first-person singular characters are "I," "me," and "my," while examples of first-person plural characters are "we," "us," and "ours." A second-person singular character is "you," and a plural character is "yourselves." Third-person singular characters refer to student names and "the teacher," and third-person plural characters include "they" and "the students." In addition, it was recorded how many times the narrator mentioned each type of character.

To explain, the characters were bolded in the following narrative by Dbeach64:

The teacher would fail **both students** on the exam that **they** were caught cheating on.

The teacher would then notify **the parents of Sophie** and **Alicia's foster parents**.

Dbeach64 included "the teacher" as a third-person singular character and "both students/they," "the parents of Sophie," and "Alicia's foster parents" as third-person plural characters. "The teacher" is mentioned twice, "both students/they" are mentioned twice, and "the parents of Sophie" and "Alicia's foster parents" are each brought up one time.

Actions. Actions are what the characters do/did in the story such as "write" and "jumped." In this blog by Tuesdayschild1, the characters' actions were bolded:

Both girls are **caught cheating** their parents **are notified** they **get** an F on the test.

Sophie's parents **set up** a meeting with the teacher to discuss her behavior and how she can make up her grade. Alicia's foster parent's **ground** her and that's the end of it.

"Both girls" were "caught cheating." This resulted in multiple actions. For example, their parents "are notified," which caused them to take action ("set up," "ground").

Psychological states. Psychological states describe how characters think and feel (Daiute, 2014). Examples are reported speech ("said"), cognition ("agree," "believe") and affect ("anger," "joy"). Psychological states are used to develop characters and highlight them in a positive or negative light (Daiute, 2014).

The psychological states were bolded in this blog comment by Wvu2018:

I **agree** that both get a bad grade and parents called. I **don't really understand** why one should get grounded and the other should not? Can you **elaborate**?

The cognitive psychological states included in this narrative were "agree" and "don't really understand." "Elaborate" was used as reported speech. These psychological states helped to present the "I" character as agreeable and curious.

Results

> School was always hard for me because I was moved around a lot. So I missed a lot. Like
>
> I'd be learning multiplication move the new school was finishing division so a lot was
>
> learned after school. ~ Talks13

As shown above, the participants' blogs contained powerful narratives around their experiences and the educational experiences of foster youth more generally. The analysis of the narratives showed three main findings: 1) There was a dichotomy between the student in foster care who was presented in a more negative light academically and behaviorally and the student not in care who was presented in a more positive light; 2) The participants connected with the fictional third-person narratives by using the "I" perspective; and 3) School mobility impacted the schooling experiences of adults formerly in care. These findings along with others are highlighted below. As a means to address the research questions, the first two sections examine the development and portrayal of characters, the third section explores how participants used the diverse narrative genres, and the last section focuses on the theme of school mobility.

Development and Portrayal of the Student in Foster Care and the Student Not in Care

The first research question was concerned with how adults formerly in foster care perceived teachers' expectations of students in foster care compared to those who are not in care. To answer this question, character mapping was conducted primarily for the narratives in response to the first vignette. This vignette created a scenario in which the teacher described his students to another teacher. Two patterns emerged depending on the presence or absence of the teacher characters in the narratives: students were described together in a positive light when the teacher was mentioned, and the student in foster care was described more negatively than the student not in care when the teacher was not mentioned.

The student in care and the non-foster peer were described as "excellent students."

Scenario One

Mr. Kendall tells Ms Albright that both boys are excellent students. With no behavior problems.

👤 talks13   📁 Uncategorized   💬 2 Comments   🕐 December 4, 2018   ✏️ Edit

Figure 3. Narrative by Talks13. This is a narrative written by Talks13 in response to vignette one.

In this narrative, Talks13 mentioned "Mr. Kendall" and "Ms. Albright," the teacher characters, each once. Mr. Kendall played an active role ("tells"). The student characters were mentioned together ("both boys"). The teacher had high expectations of both students and described them in the same way ("excellent students with no behavior problems").

Similarly, the teacher character was present in this narrative by Thereaintone1:

Assuming that Mr. Kendall was sincere and open in being a teacher he would describe both Brandon and Xavier as being willing, (for the most part) to listen and learn as their academic performance would seem to suggest or as their grades may tend to be a reflection of this, their behavioral performances may suggest that on different days one may be having a little trouble staying focused while the other is doing fine. While on the very next day the reverse may be the case, and on another day they would both be fine or strained as the case may be.

For the most part they would be just as any other student, some days are better than others, otherwise good students.

"Mr. Kendall" was mentioned twice. He was humanized as "sincere and open," and expressed with a psychological state ("describe"). "Brandon" and "Xavier" were mentioned together ("both"), and the author used the phrase, "just as any other student." This suggests that the teacher's role was to have the same expectations for all students and to not single out the student in foster care. Overall, the teacher grouped the students together and considered them "good students."

The narratives by Talks13 and Thereaintone1 reveal that when "Mr. Kendall" and/or "Ms. Albright" were mentioned in the narratives and were active characters, "Brandon" and "Xavier" were typically mentioned together and described in a positive light. The teacher was humanized with psychological states. It appeared that the participants believed that teachers should have high expectations for all students, regardless of their status in foster care.

Additionally, the narratives reflect that the participants did not want to be differentiated from their peers and did not want to stand out as a "foster child." While this came up in the participants' responses to the vignettes, it was also observed in the autobiographical narratives:
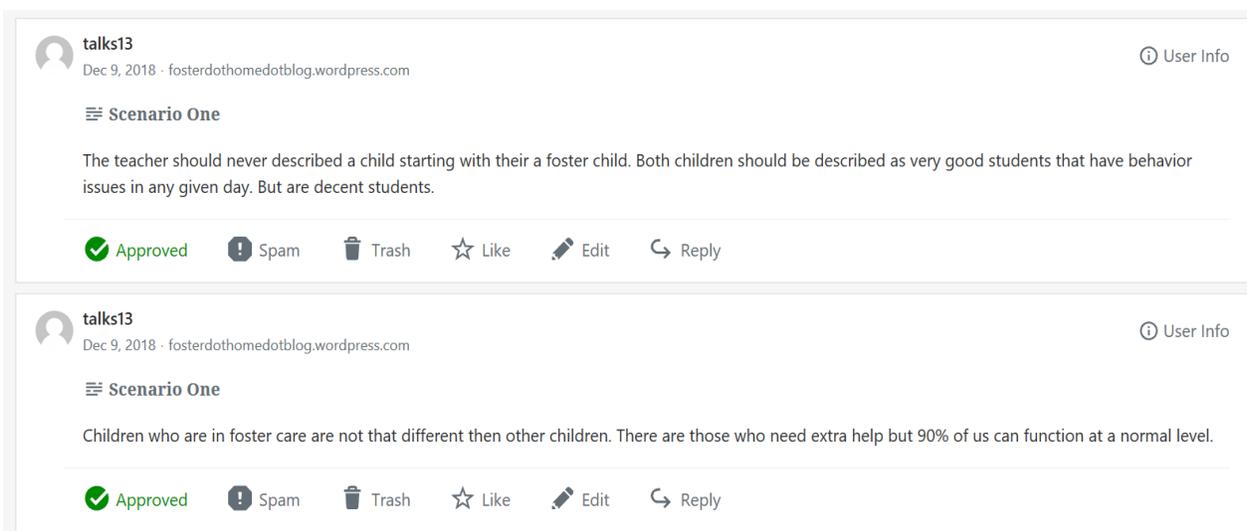

Figure 4. Autobiographical narratives by Talks13. This illustrates two comments that Talks13 made in response to blog posts.

In the first comment, Talks13 included "the teacher" as a character. From her perspective, Talks13 explained what "the teacher" character "should never" do and what the character "should" do when describing "children." Talks13 also used "us" to represent children in foster care and "other children" to represent those who are not in foster care. Despite distinguishing "us" from "other children," it seemed that Talks13 did not want to be only defined as a "foster child," but rather as a "decent" student who "functions at a normal level" like "other children."

   A dichotomy between the student in foster care and the student not in foster care. By contrast, the second pattern observed from the narratives involved the absence of teacher characters. When the teacher character was not mentioned in the narrative or was not an active character, "Brandon" and "Xavier" were described separately. The student characters were described differently, and "Brandon," the student in foster care, was described in a more negative light.

   This narrative by Tuesdayschild1 illustrates this pattern:

   Brandon has some trouble making friends and interacting in class. He also came to my class midterm and has been trying to catch up ever since.

   Xavier grew up in this school is friends with almost every one. He is right about the middle of his class academically. Doesn't seem to struggle with grades or friends.

Tuesdayschild1 did not include any teacher characters. She described "Brandon" and "Xavier" separately, and brought both student characters to life with psychological states. The psychological states attached to Brandon were "some trouble" and "trying," and the psychological states attached to Xavier were "is friends" and "doesn't seem to struggle." Thus, Brandon was portrayed as having a more difficult time with making friends and performing well academically compared to Xavier.

Student characters were also not mentioned together in this post:

Brandon the student in foster care adjusts to the environment of the classroom quickly but

isn't adjusting behaviorally [*sic*]. Since he has just moved into this foster home he is

acting up in class as the "class clown" not all foster kids act this way in particular but

since he has been moved houses and moved classes he, at a young age can't explain his

emotions properly. He gains the attention of the class but he never makes a real friend.

He can't complete his work in a timely manner. He isn't really meshing with the other

students.

(Not all foster kids are alike and will transition this way)

Xavier, who is not in foster care is adjusting to the classroom and made a new friend. He

is completing his work on time. This transition is a lot easier for him than it is for

Brandon.

Because this narrative was more complex, the character map is presented below (Table 2).

Table 2

Character Map for a Narrative by Cizzial216

CHARACTER MAP				
	Characters	Character Mentions	Actions	Psychological States
Third-Person Singular	Brandon/he/his	12	Moved (3 times) Acting up Gains attention Can't complete	Adjusts Isn't adjusting Can't explain Isn't meshing Never makes
	Xavier/he/him	4	Completing	Adjusting Made a new friend
	Friend	2		
Third-Person Plural	All foster kids	2	Act Will transition	
	Other students	1		

This table shows that Cizzial216 did not include any first-person characters, and did not mention a teacher character. "Brandon" was the focal character because the author emphasized his character the most with actions and psychological states. "Brandon/he/his" was mentioned 12 times, while "Xavier/he/him" was mentioned four times. Although the narrative did not explicitly mention the "I" perspective, it can be argued that Cizzial216 inserted some of her experiences into Brandon's character. The student characters were perceived as opposites ("can't complete" versus "completing" and "isn't adjusting" versus "adjusting"). The student in foster care was labeled as the "class clown." He had a more difficult time transitioning and completing his work than did the student not in care.

Significant Characters Involved in the Foster Child's Experience

   Teacher treatment toward the student in foster care and the non-foster peer.

Table 3

Summary Character Map for Narratives Responding to Vignette Two

CHARACTER MAP				
	Characters	Character Mentions	Actions	Psychological States
First-Person Singular	I	1		Assume
Second-Person Singular	You	1		
Third-Person Singular	Alicia/her/she	9	Have a talk	
	Sophie/her/she	6	Make up	Experience punishment
	Teacher/she/her	17	Go over (2) Take away Refer Give Make Call home Takes Goes Would fail Notify	Explain Make clear Asks Inquired Saw Explains Thought Offers
	Alicia's social worker	2		
	Counselor	2		
Third-Person Plural	Children	1	Get away	
	Both Alicia and Sophie/they/them/students	17	Cheated (2) Were cheating Caught cheating (2)	
	Facility caretakers	1		
	Parents of both girls	2		
	Alicia's foster parents	3	Report Ground	
	Sophie's parents	3	Go out of their way Set up	Discuss

The other part of research question one addressed perceptions of teacher treatment toward foster youth and their non-foster peers. Teacher treatment was mostly discussed in the third-person narratives. Specifically, the second vignette prompt asked participants to write about what would happen if a teacher caught students cheating. Table 3 shows a summary character map of all of the narratives responding to this vignette. As shown, the teacher had an active role and addressed and punished the students in the same way.

> For example, Wvu2018 assumed that the students would receive the same punishment: Being that Alicia and Sophie both cheated on a test and are both in the same grade and class I can only assume that they would both be punished the same way. The teacher would give them both a zero on the test, make them do it over and or call home to inform the parents.

In this narrative, the student characters were mentioned together ("both") and had the same action ("cheated"). This triggered the teacher to perform many actions ("give," "make," "call"). This shows that the teacher was responsible for taking an active role in addressing the cheating situation. In this case, the author's perception of the teacher was that he or she would treat both students alike.

> Talks13 responded to this vignette in a similar way:
> Both Alicia and Sophie should get an F on the Math Exam due to the fact they both cheated on the exam.

This narrative presents an account of what "should" happen. "The teacher" was not mentioned as a character, but "Alicia" and "Sophie" were mentioned together here as well. It seems that the author believed that the teacher "should" give both students "an F" because they "both cheated."

In summary, the participants conveyed the message that children in foster care should not be let off the hook. For example, Bratgirl5266 commented:

I agree completely! Cheating is cheating, no matter who does it!

Thus, if a student in foster care commits the same act as someone who is not in care, he or she should face the same punishment. In a study by Altshuler (2003), a student in foster care had similar thoughts:

If I have a book report due and its not finished, Ms. C. will take me to the hall and she'll just give me special treatment and stuff, and I really don't like getting special treatment. I want to be treated just like she treats all the other kids. (Altshuler, 2003, p. 55)

Likewise, the participants in this current study believed that teachers should treat all students equally.

Caregiver involvement in students' school careers. The participants used the first-person and third-person narratives to talk about caregiver involvement. Caregivers or parents were not mentioned in the vignette prompt about cheating; however, some participants inserted "parents," "caretakers," and "foster parents" into the narratives (Table 3). While the narratives did not reveal differential teacher treatment toward students, caregiver involvement differed between the student in care and the student not in care.

Below is a narrative by LM:

Alicia will more than likely be looked over - due to not having a solid family structure in the foster system. A lot of time, it was easy to watch children in foster programs get away with a lot simply because the facility caretakers have to many kids to caretaker ratio. Sophie will more than likely experience some form of punishment, whether it be

detention, in class detention, suspension, etc. More than likely Sophie's parents will

somehow become involved and go out of their way to ensure it does not happen again.

To address what happened next after the students were caught cheating, LM did not

mention "the teacher" at all. Instead, he focused on how "Alicia" and "Sophie" would be

punished differently. The author included "facility caretakers" and "Sophie's parents" as

characters. "Sophie's parents" were much more involved than the "facility caretakers" because

of the "kid to caretaker ratio."

In the next comment, Tuesdayschild1 offered personal experience:

I'm not saying she should get grounded. In my experience most foster parents don't

follow through to find out how to prevent it from happening again they just punish the

child.

In this narrative, the "foster parents" were depicted as not very involved. Instead of talking to the

child in foster care or to the teacher about how to "prevent" cheating in the future, the "foster

parents'" only role was to "punish the child."

It appears that the participants perceived "Sophie's parents" as having greater

involvement in her academic career than "Alicia's caregivers." Research has found that foster

parents are not regularly involved with their children's education at home (Blome, 1997), and

many do not frequently attend school functions (Beisse & Tyre, 2013). In line with these

findings and the content of the narratives, an important goal of school administrators is to

improve caregiver involvement.

Participants' Use of Diverse Narrative Genres

The second research question asked how adults formerly in foster care used the narratives

to reenact their educational experiences. To explore this question, the fictional third-person

narratives were compared with the first-person narratives using character mapping. It was found that many of the participants explicitly inserted themselves into the third-person narratives by using the "I" perspective. In addition, "Brandon," the student in foster care, was mentioned more times and in more detail. In all of the narratives responding to the first vignette prompt, "Brandon" was mentioned 31 times alone, while "Xavier" was mentioned 16 times alone.

The "I" perspective was utilized in this narrative by LM:

For Brandon, the student in foster care - It might be assumed he would best be described as somewhat of an extrovert. Expressive and easily outgoing, as I was around that age. Socializing in a brand new environment was always somewhat easy at that age for myself. In the foster care system your constantly enveloped in new situations. Whether it's meeting new people - or being introduced to new environments regularly. Xavier on the other hand might be somewhat introverted. Shyer and more kept to himself. I believe this is due to lack of forced socialization. In terms of academic performance I believe Brandon may perform a little behind his classmates. This was true for me because I was not generally focused on studies - but more so my life outside academics. Xavier would more than likely perform better and be more focused because he has family structure and support.

The author wrote in such a way that the student in foster care had similar experiences and characteristics to the author himself. For instance, "Brandon" was portrayed as being a "little behind his classmates" academically because that "was true for me." Here, the author specifically used "I," "me," and "myself" to show that Brandon's character was a reflection of himself.

In the next narrative, Dbeach64 used the phrase "in my own experience:"

Mr. Kendall would most likely describe Xavier as being from a stable home environment, and that his behavioral and academic performance would probably remain the same in Ms. Albright's class. Mr. Kendall, in my own experience, would say that Brandon was in foster care and didn't put any effort into classwork, and has no motivation to learn or to succeed in class. Prior to being put into Mr. Kendall's class, Brandon was in special education classes due to having dyslexia. After being placed into foster care Brandon was placed into Mr. Kendall's mainstream classroom. Mr. Kendall never seemed to care about Brandon's problems with the class materials and didn't help him to succeed, so Brandon failed his classwork and homework.

The character map for this narrative is provided below:

Table 4

Character Map for a Narrative by Dbeach64

CHARACTER MAP				
	Characters	Character Mentions	Actions	Psychological States
First-Person Singular	My	1		
Third-Person Singular	Mr. Kendall	5	Didn't help	Describe Say Never seemed to care
	Ms. Albright	1		
	Xavier/his	2		
	Brandon/him	6	Didn't put effort Was placed Failed	No motivation Problems

By looking at this organizer, it is apparent that "Mr. Kendall" and "Brandon/him" were the focal characters. Both of these characters were humanized with actions and psychological states. "Brandon" was mentioned more times than "Xavier." The use of the phrase "in my own experience" was assigned to the teacher. This meant that the author inserted the characteristics of her past teachers into "Mr. Kendall's" character. Dbeach64 did not explicitly compare Brandon's character to herself. However, it can be argued that the author's use of specific details like "having dyslexia" was a way for her to distance herself from her own experiences and showcase them through Brandon's character.

The above narrative by Dbeach64 can also be compared to this autobiographical narrative:

When I was put in foster care I was placed in child development and Spanish 1 without prior experience in either class. I was set up to fell [*sic*].

This narrative presented a similar story of a character being placed into a class and failing academically. In both narratives, the character failed because of circumstances outside of his or her control. The two narratives differed because the one by Dbeach64 contained more psychological states. Overall, the characters were brought to life more in the third-person narratives. The first-person narratives included many cognitive psychological states ("think," "agree," "feel") to express the authors' thoughts on the blog content, but few affective psychological states were attached to first-person characters.

Life and Education in Foster Care

After looking at both of the third-person and first-person narratives, student mobility was a theme that came up across narrative genres. As mentioned in the Introduction, past research has examined the impact of school mobility on achievement (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Zima et al.,

2000). In a study by Martin and Jackson (2002), a respondent who spent time in foster care stressed the importance of stability and advised "not to move kids unless it's absolutely necessary." Many of the participants in this current study discussed how moving affected their schooling experiences and the experiences of those in foster care more generally.

Cizzial216 wrote:

Brandon the student in foster care adjusts to the environment of the classroom quickly but isn't adjusting behaviorally [*sic*]. Since he has just moved into this foster home he is acting up in class as the "class clown" not all foster kids act this way in particular but since he has been moved houses and moved classes he, at a young age can't explain his emotions properly. He gains the attention of the class but he never makes a real friend. He can't complete his work in a timely manner. He isn't really meshing with the other students.

(Not all foster kids are alike and will transition this way)

Xavier, who is not in foster care is adjusting to the classroom and made a new friend. He is completing his work on time. This transition is a lot easier for him than it is for Brandon.

The author described Brandon using psychological states ("adjusts," "isn't adjusting," "can't explain," "isn't meshing," "never makes"). These character enactments were in relation to "Brandon" moving houses and classes. For example, "Brandon" was "acting up" in class after he transferred to a new foster home. This shows that moving around can affect students' social and emotional development.

In the above narrative, the student in foster care "never makes a real friend." "Friends" came up in this narrative as well:

And since they don't know how long they will be at that school they don't try to [*sic*] hard to make friends.

This narrative captures the uncertainly of moving and how that affects the foster child's decision to make friends at school.

Talks13 also experienced moving:

School was always hard for me because I was moved around a lot. So I missed a lot. Like I'd be learning multiplication move the new school as finishing division so a lot was learned after school.

This narrative presents an autobiographical description of how moving negatively impacted the author's ability to learn academically.

In relation to moving, Bratgirl5266 brought up the transfer of school records:

Unfortunately, children in foster care are often placed in educational setting without the benefit of their record so being place does with them. This can cause problems and unreasonable expectations on kids!

Researchers have found that the school records of foster youth are often missing information (Zetin et al., 2004). This means that students may not be receiving the accommodations that they actually need.

Discussion

The major patterns can be summarized as follows:

Development and portrayal of the student in foster care and the student not in foster care:

- When the teacher character was absent in the narrative, there was a dichotomy between the student in foster care and the non-foster peer. The student in foster care was presented in a more negative light academically and behaviorally.

- The student in foster care was described with more character enactments.

Significant characters involved in the foster child's experience:

- The teacher was perceived to treat the student in foster care and the student not in care equally.

- Foster parents and caregivers were perceived to have low school involvement.

Participants' use of diverse narrative genres:

- The authors connected with the foster child in the fictional narratives by using the "I" perspective.

- The fictional third-person narratives were richer in detail and contained more affective psychological states.

Life and education in foster care:

- School mobility appeared to negatively influence the participants' educational experiences.

Strengths

This study offered new methods for studying the experiences of former students. By asking participants to respond to scenarios, they had the power to position themselves and tell their stories in unique ways through first-person and third-person narratives (Daiute, 2014; Daiute et al., 2015). In addition, this study included adults formerly in foster care. Retrospective studies are useful because they allow participants to reflect on their childhood, which can make meaningful impact on the academic careers of foster youth today.

Limitations and Future Research

This study included a relatively small sample size. The sample size was chosen because "qualitative samples are usually small since they are rich in detail" (Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014, p. 117). Although participants provided meaningful responses to the narrative prompts, their experiences cannot be generalized to the larger population of individuals who have experienced foster care. Future research should try recruiting from organizations to increase the pool of participants. A downside to this recruitment method, though, is that the participants are likely to make up a homogenous group in terms of similar background and advocating for foster care. The ultimate goal would be to include participants that reflect a diverse range of experiences and educational backgrounds.

The sample included only adults who were formerly in foster care. This was done on purpose to highlight these adults' experiences from their perspective and to give alumni of foster care a platform to tell their stories. It would be interesting to expand on this study by exploring the perspectives of teachers as well. Previous studies have interviewed teachers about their experiences and views on teaching foster youth, but it seemed that teachers were reluctant to differentiate experiences of foster youth from experiences of their non-foster peers (Finkelstein et al., 2002). The use of narrative methodology rather than interview assessments may be more useful. Teachers' responses to fictional narratives about teacher treatment of students from different family backgrounds may be more telling than their responses to interview questions.

Another limitation of the study is that it did not ask for participants' demographics. As a result, narratives could not be compared across age, race, socioeconomic background, or educational attainment levels. Future research may consider asking participants for this

information. It would be interesting to see how narrative meaning and character roles change across time depending on a person's academic success.

Implications for Research and Educators

Researchers and educators alike can build on this study by using the narratives collected for group discussion. For researchers, this discussion could take place within focus groups and for educators, it could occur in the classroom. In either setting, students in foster care and students not in care would be able to discuss the hypothetical narratives. This could prompt the students to think about their own experiences while also acknowledging others' experiences. Facilitation of a discussion around the narratives and students' experiences may foster better understanding and enhance empathy among students and their peers.

On a broader level, this project used narratives as a method to recognize potential stigma. This has implications for researchers who might want to use various kinds of narratives to study current and retrospective experiences of those in challenging and often discriminatory situations. Individuals may be more comfortable sharing difficult stories if they position their perspectives through third-person characters in fictional narratives.

This study also has implications for educators who teach students in foster care. Social workers should work with schools to inform educators about the foster care system. As teachers become more aware of the system, they are better able to reflect on their experiences teaching foster youth as well as the stereotypes imposed on foster children by society. It is important that teachers, social workers, and foster caregivers hold high expectations for those who have experienced care. This could help to decrease the labeling and discrimination against students in care.

Mott Haven Academy Charter School, in the South Bronx, may serve as a model for schools across the country. The school has been successfully educating foster youth since 2008. Each classroom has two teachers, who are trained in trauma, along with a maximum of 26 students (Fertig, 2015). A fifth-grader enrolled in the school said, "I feel free when I'm at school" (Fertig, 2015). A welcoming environment appears to positively influence academic performance since students are scoring above average on state tests (Fertig, 2015). Thus, all schools, but especially schools with a high population of foster youth, should consider implementing a similar philosophy of education in order to improve student outcomes. If teachers are made aware of the factors that influence the educational lives of foster youth, they will be more effective in teaching these youth.

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