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Effects of Transitional Goal-Setting and Programming on the Number of Children in Foster Care Who Will Meet the High School Graduation Requirement.

Kim Smith  
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Abstract
Annually, seven billion dollars is spent on the care of foster children. Yet, many foster children drop out of high school, become homeless, incarcerated, and welfare recipients. Most foster children — age out of foster care lacking survival skills. At age 21 foster children are no longer eligible for foster-care. Roughly 46% of the foster-care population become dropouts. Through the theoretical lens, this study investigated children’s foster-care experience regarding meeting the high school graduation requirement. Using qualitative methods, interviews were conducted on foster children who successfully graduated from high school and attend college. They provided insight into the obstacles foster children had to overcome. However, in spite of their success, they remain affected by their experience and continue to need services. Findings revealed three indicators that adversely impact a foster child’s ability to graduate from high school— self-efficacy, emotional stability, and services. Laws must be enacted allowing foster children to remain in care while meeting their postsecondary goals. Also, the federal government must mandate an expansion of the 90-day transition plan criterion, increase the aging out criterion to age 26 to enable foster children to reach their postsecondary goals, mandate that foster-care agencies employ an education specialist to assist students in ascertaining their career objectives and thereafter conduct a follow-up study.

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Effects of Transitional Goal-Setting and Programming on the Number of Children in Foster Care Who Will Meet the High School Graduation Requirement.

By

Kim Smith

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Claudia L. Edwards, Ph.D.

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Dedication

I would like to acknowledge the many people who provided me encouragement and understanding as I pursued my doctorate. To all my children, Jeffrey, Kimberly, Brittany, Elijah, Chyanne, Isiah, Tylynn, and Ariel, you are my inspiration. Thank you for affording me the opportunity to complete my doctoral studies. To Susan McPherson and Nefertiti Smith, thank you for facilitating my research. To Bruce Johnson, Pamela Kuhens, Cyreeta Collins and Shirley Graham thank you for your assistance and contribution to my dissertation. To Dr. Arthur “Sam” Walton, Dr. Ronald Valenti, and all my professors, your vision for the Doctorate Program has provided me the source of stimulation and perseverance. To my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Claudia L. Edwards, thank you for your guidance, for pushing me beyond my comfort zone, and for not allowing me to settle for less than excellence! To my committee member, and mentor, Dr. Annette Parchment-Pennant, you were there for me through the attainment of each of my dissertation milestones, thank you.
Biographical Sketch

Kim Smith is currently the Supervisor of Special Education at Mount Vernon City School District. Ms. Smith attended Iona College from 1975 to 1979 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree in 1979. She attended the New York Institute of Technology from 1983 to 1985 and graduated with a Master of Science degree in 1985. She came to St. John Fisher College in the summer of 2009 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Smith pursued her research in Effects of Transitional Goal-Setting and Programming on the Number of Children in Foster Care Who Will Meet the High School Graduation Requirement under the direction of Dr. Claudia L. Edwards and Dr. Annette Parchment-Pennant and received the Ed. D. degree in 2011.
Abstract

Annually, seven billion dollars is spent on the care of foster children. Yet, many foster children drop out of high school, become homeless, incarcerated, and welfare recipients. Most foster children “age out” of foster care lacking survival skills. At age 21 foster children are no longer eligible for foster-care. Roughly 46% of the foster-care population become dropouts. Through the theoretical lens, this study investigated children’s foster-care experience regarding meeting the high school graduation requirement. Using qualitative methods, interviews were conducted on foster children who successfully graduated from high school and attend college. They provided insight into the obstacles foster children had to overcome. However, in spite of their success, they remain affected by their experience and continue to need services. Findings revealed three indicators that adversely impact a foster child’s ability to graduate from high school—self-efficacy, emotional stability, and services. Laws must be enacted allowing foster children to remain in care while meeting their postsecondary goals. Also, the federal government must mandate an expansion of the 90-day transition plan criterion, increase the aging out criterion to age 26 to enable foster children to reach their postsecondary goals, mandate that foster-care agencies employ an education specialist to assist students in ascertaining their career objectives and thereafter conduct a follow-up study.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“My daddy ate my eyes,” was what four-year-old Angelo Mendoza, Jr., reported to investigators. Angelo was in protective custody, as he suffered at the hands of his father on April 28, 2009. He was allegedly tortured and blinded by his father. Consequently Mr. Mendoza was charged with abusing his son. (KTLA, 2009). This is an example of the trauma that foster children experience, which require their removal from their biological parents and being placed in care. Typically, foster children have experienced violence and in many cases the violence is repeated (McKellar, 2007). Stein et al. (2001) found that by the time foster children enter care, 85% of them have witnessed violence. In addition, at least 51% of the foster children in care have personally experienced being physically abused. According to Chibnall et al., approximately 2,672,000 reports of abuse are reported annually. Because of cases like Angelo’s, emphasis is placed on children’s safety and the services they will need to prevent or remedy the harm that has been done to them physically and mentally, rather than preparing them for life beyond childhood. While this concentration is necessary, foster children receiving an education is important as well.

Annually there are approximately 510,000 children in foster care within the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). More specifically there are approximately 25,878 children in foster care within the State of New York yearly (New York State Office of Children and Family Services, n.d). Although these children are rescued from harm, put into safe shelter, and provided educational services
the vast majority of them never experience success. More than 7% of children in care continue in the system between Pre-K to 12th-grade. In spite of the $7 billion invested in their shelter and education most of them dropout of high school, and are unable to live a productive life (Geen, Waters Boot, Tumlin, 1999). This study examines factors that help foster children graduate from high school and make healthy transition into society.

Unfortunately children are placed in foster care to be safeguarded from maltreatment, abuse, or neglect and to enhance their standard of living. Children being placed in foster care have increased since the late 1970’s (McKellar, 2007). African Americans represent 31%, Latinos 20%, and other minority groups 10% of the foster care population (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Of the children in foster care about one-third remains in care for over three years. The average foster care placement is for about five years. A minimum of 20,000 foster children are emancipated from foster care annually (McKellar, 2007). At age 21 foster children become ineligible to receive foster care services. While there are some success stories, foster children leave the foster care system without the essential skills to survive. In 2008 about 285,000 children were discharged from the foster care system and 10% of that total were emancipated (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008). Foster students who fail to graduate from high school lack the essential critical thinking skills and knowledge needed to a lead productive adult life, which leads to incarceration, homelessness, or receiving public assistance (Schneider, 2007). According to Carlson (2008) there is a 46% high school drop-out rate among foster children. Accordingly Garland (2010) states that at 25% of the foster care population will experience incarceration within two years of leaving the foster care system.
Research shows that transitional planning and transitional services are instrumental in determining when a foster child will successfully graduate from high school and meet their postsecondary goals (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Kuder, 2009; Minnesota Department of Human Services, 1999). In spite of the outcomes achieved through receiving transitional services, it does not take precedence with foster children in care. Given the unsafe conditions from which they are rescued, more emphasis is placed on sustaining a safe and healthy living environment. Transitional planning is necessary to assist foster children move from one phase of their life to another. Transitional services can be defined as a coordinated set of activities driven by goal-oriented planning. Transitional goal setting must concentrate on a student’s career objective, interest and strengths. The transition services designation has four fundamental elements, which includes assessing abilities, future planning, coordinated activities and setting postsecondary goals (Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2008). Elements within each category are relevant and significant to successful student transition. The benefit of transitional services is increasing academic success through a goal-oriented process (University of the State of New York, State Education Department, 2010).

Problem Statement

The purpose of this research is to examine the educational experiences of college students who are foster children, successfully completed high school, and went on to become productive citizens in society. Qualitative methods will be used to extend existing research on transitional planning as a tool for increasing the likelihood of success for foster care children. There has been extensive research on enhancing transition
services for students with disabilities, but there is less research focusing on transitional services for foster children and, specifically, research into what they themselves have found helpful in enabling them to graduation from high school. This scarcity is challenging as it relates to spearheading efforts for transformation. Improvements leading to the educational success of foster children are essential. To this end, the research will explore the connection between transitional services and foster children graduating from high school.

**Description of children in foster care.** Foster children have a legacy of facing major challenges throughout their educational experience. They struggle academically from the elementary level onward. There is a correlation between children in foster care being moved from foster home to foster home and losing credits. Consequently these inconsistencies impact foster children’s ability to meet the graduation requirements, and fail to receive the necessary special education services in a timely manner (Carlson, 2008). Given numerous life-threatening circumstances, many children are forced to enter foster care, yet emphasis on education outcomes is not a priority and not enough importance is placed on academic excellence (Conger & Rebeck, 2001).

While this research focuses on high school students, the impact on children of all ages in foster care with a history of disruption of the educational services cannot be overlooked. The average age of children in the foster care system is from 6 years old to 18 years old. Their mean age is about 10 years old and they are typically fourth graders. Carlson (2008) reported that foster children are often absent from school, have more academic and behavioral problems, and suffer from a high school-to-school mobility rate. Accordingly, foster children are students at risk of failing in school (Pears, Fisher, &
Bronz, 2007). Foster children are in desperate need of services. These needs go unattended. When they reach high school they score between 15 and 20% lower than their classmates on standardized examinations and they have a 40% rate of repeating a grade in school (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

Factors that affect foster children’s family circumstances include, parents abusing drugs and maltreatment. Homelessness has a history that began in foster care. Consequently, approximately 60% of the homeless found their roots in foster care.

Students leave foster care prematurely as they drop out, age out, or even graduate from high school lacking the skills needed to succeed in adult life. More specifically, they are unprepared for independent living (Hurley, 2002).

Medical complications are prevalent among foster children in comparison to their peers. They lack having regular medical examinations. As a result, they have low weight and height and developmental delays, which can be also be attributed to their poor nutrition. In addition, they have chronic medical problems including untreated acute conditions. Foster children’s medical records are generally incomplete. Specifically, they have insufficient immunization records (McKellar, 2007). According to the UCLA Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities, children in foster care have a 60% degree of chronic medical problems. At least 25% have a minimum of three chronic medical problems and 50% to 80% have mental illnesses and/or behavioral issues. Reportedly, only 5% of foster children are free from mental problems (Inkelas, 2002).

Social service agencies have had to focus on removing abused and neglected children from their homes to ensure their safety, placing little emphasis on the continuity of academic success for children in care (Geenen & Powers, 2004).
Comparing foster children to special education students. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, U.S. Department of Education, 2004), continues to focus on increasing the high school graduation rate by placing emphasis on students with disabilities meeting their postsecondary goals by mandating that districts provide transition services. The law requires that school districts coordinate activities to foster a smooth transition from high school to meeting their postsecondary goals. In the State of New York, much emphasis is placed on setting postsecondary goals based upon students’ career objectives. Students with disabilities age 15 years and above must receive transitional services. This planning is for life after high school, which focuses on education, employment, housing, adult service, and community needs (New York State Education Department, 2006).

While there are about 510,000 children in foster care nationally, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (2004) reported that there are 6.8 million special needs students across the United States. The graduation rate of foster children is significantly less than those students with disabilities. Children in foster care graduate from high school at a 50% rate in comparison to special education students who complete school at a 68% rate (Carlson, 2008).

There are resemblances between the children in foster care and the special education student. They center on the student moving from school-to-school, gaps in learning, emotional issues, and discipline problems (Geenen & Powers, 2004). It would appear that both foster children and special needs children have learning disabilities, mental retardation, and emotional disturbance. Foster care children also demonstrate behavior problems that are found frequently in special education children (Pecora et al.,
Both groups demonstrate illicit aggressive behavior toward their unsuspecting peers. Rebelling against the authority figure and having temper tantrums is not uncommon for either population. Teacher reports indicate that foster children have short attention spans and poor study skills and the same can be said about special education children. Moreover, children in foster care experience gaps in learning based on having attention deficits and demonstrating behaviors that violate the management of the classroom. Adolescents often struggle with authority figures, feel inferior, worthless, and become overwhelmed regarding their approaching emancipation. Conduct disorder is the most prevalent single disorder among special education students as well as foster children (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009).

**Benefit of transitional services.** Research findings from Geenen and Powers (2004) show the value of transition planning as a strategy for increasing the likelihood of academic success among high school students. Because transition plans are the blueprint between school and adult life, the plan must be relevant and significant in order to have a meaningful influence. For foster children to acquire a worthwhile lifestyle, the transition plan must provide activities leading to a successful life. The plan is the framework for developing goals and must include specific timelines leading towards measurable outcomes. Effective transition practices include student planning, student involvement in extramural activities, career preparation, on-the-job training in career interests, developing skills in self-esteem building, and independent living skills and mentorships (Geenen & Powers, 2004).

Transitional goal-setting and programming will increase the high school graduation rate among foster children. Many students are uncertain regarding what they
their career objectives and their postsecondary goals. Therefore, they lose focus and direction and abandon their goal of graduating from high school. Therefore, it is crucial for foster children to develop their interests and realize their strengths in order to establish their future plans. Transition assessments serve to identify competence and skills that foster children will need to assist them in obtaining their educational benchmarks and postsecondary goals. Unfortunately, if foster children do not develop a transition plan to assist them with meeting the high school requirement, they may be at risk of repeating the cycle of abuse or neglect. Foster children who drop out of high school face a troubled future because they often lack a family support system, which leads to incarceration, homelessness, or dependency on public assistance (Schneider, 2007).

The general education student population, the foster care student population, as well as, the special education population experience developmental disparities. Usually, general education high school students tend to be motivated, have long range plans and demonstrate a commitment towards becoming academically successful. In addition, general education high school students tend to be interested in coeducational activities, they desire leadership roles, they respond to adult support, they seek opportunities for self-expression and they raise their consciousness. General education students who deviate from the norm by displaying disruptive behaviors and who lag behind their peers academically are often referred for special education services and support. Therefore, general education students could develop social-emotional problems due to being placed into foster care as a result of abuse and neglect (Pennington, 2008).
Many special education students are placed in programs that can meet their needs. Counseling is a key component in this service delivery. In addition, treatment of the special education student population is offered to them through special education services in school and referrals to outside agencies. On the other hand, child welfare agencies coordinate services for foster care children that include counseling, tutoring, recreation therapy, and family therapy. However, students in either situation would benefit from receiving transition services. Transition services ensure that students meet their postsecondary goals (Geenen & Powers, 2004).

Westat’s (1991) evaluation of foster children’s ability to become independent through various programs demonstrates that within 2.5 to 4 years after emancipating they experience deviant behaviors. These behaviors consist of, at least 50% of former foster children becoming substance abusers, 25% of them engaging in criminal behaviors and 25% them becoming homeless. Based upon Westat’s evaluation only 17% of the foster care population that age out of the foster care system will become independent productive citizens (as cited in Geenen & Powers, 2004, p. 1). In lieu of these negative behaviors, preparation for the future is strongly advocated by social service agencies. Specifically, a concentration on postsecondary results is necessary to prevent an unproductive lifestyle, which is complicated with deviant behaviors.

Theoretical Rationale

The focus of this study investigates literature that emphasizes the connection between a set of coordinated activities and graduating from high school, establishing postsecondary outcomes, and, where possible, is germane to the foster care population. In this endeavor, this research seeks to systematize the framework within three broad
categories, (a) laws and legislative reforms governing transition services, (b) foster care alumni studies, and (c) theories on transition planning and postsecondary outcomes. In addition, this study focuses on discovering whether the effects of transitional goal setting and programming will increase the high school graduation rate of children in foster care. The transition theory is relevant, as it focuses upon the connection between school experiences and the postsecondary transition. As explained by Pecora et al. (2006) and Geenen and Powers (2004), the transition model focuses on participation in extracurricular activities, independent living training, and educational and/or vocational preparation. Kohler explains the importance of providing transition services in her *Taxonomy for Transition Programming*. She focuses on foster children meeting their postsecondary goals (Kohler, 1996). Transitional services are not a new phenomenon; their origins may be found in the 1970s. While transition theory dates back to over two decades, it is still prevalent today, and could possibly be beneficial to foster children by mandating that they set postsecondary goals in their quest to graduate from high school.

**History of transition services.** The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) revolutionized transitional services and its funding starting in 1980s. This effort coincided with research on transitional services as early as in the late 1970s. The research placed prominence on increasing the postsecondary outcomes of students with disabilities. Madeleine Will, was the assistant secretary of the U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services for the U.S. Department of Education. She suggested that the nonprofit Marriot Foundation’s Bridges from School to Work be used as a conceptual model of transition (Will, 1984). The bridge in this model was compared to a bridge between the safety found within schools and the dangers
students’ experienced at home, in their communities and in their circumstances. Will further defined crossing this bridge for individuals with disabilities as meeting their needs in order for them to acquire their desired employment outcome (Johnson, 2002b).

In 1985, Andrew Halpern built upon the Bridges from School to Work model of transition to include residential, employment, and social community adjustments (Johnson, 2002b). In 1989 OSERS funded the National Longitudinal Transition Study, which interviewed 8,000 youth with disabilities to examine such characteristics as postsecondary employment, social behaviors, residential independence, and adult services. This study revealed that family high socioeconomic status were significant predictors of postsecondary employment, namely (Brewer, 2005). In 1990 IDEA was passed and included stipulations for transitions services. In 1991, OSERS funded the Systems Change in Transition priority. The amendment of the Rehabilitation Act, in 1992, included provision for transition services similar to IDEA. (Johnson, 2002b).

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) continues to enhance academic outcomes for special education students by mandating districts to provide transition services. IDEA has aided in a 14% increase in the high school graduation rate from 1996-97 to 2005-06 (U.S. Department of Education, 2008). The law mandates that districts coordinate activities to ensure that special education students develop self-sufficiency skills and work towards obtaining their career objectives. This planning is for life after high school, which focuses on education, employment, housing, adult service, and community needs. As a result, the high school graduation rate has increased (Cortiella, 2005).
Similarly, the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 inspired activities that would lead to foster children reaching their postsecondary goals, including graduating from high school and engaging in skill development. Additional activities includes, training in budgeting and financial planning, which will assist foster children in developing their independent living skills. The act doubled the federal funding to support children in foster care prior to emancipating from the foster care. In addition, funding could be used for higher education, technical training, and job training (Lips, 2007).

On the other hand, IDEA mandates that special education students receive transitional services at 15 years and older. School districts are mandated to implement appropriate measurable postsecondary goals for special education students related to activities required to meet the graduation requirement and develop career interest (University of the State of New York, New York State Education Department, 2009). A coordinated set of activities are necessary to assist students to reach their career objectives (National Transition Network, 1996). Foster children without a special education classification may not have this type of support.

Transition services have become a priority for students with disabilities. According to IDEA, goals have been realized for special education students as a direct result of engaging in transitional planning. IDEA has endorsed self-determination theory. It merits discussion, training, and implementation as mandated by IDEA for students with disabilities. Self-determination requires that an individual develop skills that will enable them to be responsible for their own destiny (Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 2010). Field et al. (1998) define *self-determination* as behaviors that enable
individuals to become self-reliant (p. 115). They further state that self-determination requires an awareness of one’s abilities and potential.

With regard to foster children, Public Law 110-351, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoption Act of 2008, has mandated a new transition planning provision to commence with foster children emancipating from care. This act requires that a comprehensive long-term plan is created that includes activities essential to preparing aging out foster children for self-sufficiency. The caseworker must develop a personalized transition plan as directed by the foster child (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2008). Also, this provision mandates that caseworkers, in conjunction with foster children, execute a transition plan. This transitional plan must be developed at least 90 days prior to a foster child emancipating from care. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Act of 2008 is an amendment to the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Act. The Chafee Foster Care Independence Act provides federal funding to support children in care regarding meeting their postsecondary goals, it does not require caseworkers, agencies, or stakeholders to provide transition planning. Yet, the 90-day criterion for foster children, in comparison to the three-year IDEA criterion for special education, is inadequate.

This criterion is similar to the student exit summary that IDEA requires for students whose eligibility for special education services terminates as a result of graduating from high school or aging out. A student exit summary must be developed to provide a special education student with a written report that provides pertinent information which will help them transition from high school to adult life. A student exit summary is an applicable document that summarizes student’s abilities, skills, and needs.
It provides recommendations to support successful transition to postsecondary activities (New York State Education Department, 2010). In summary, special education students are mandated to receive transitional services beginning at age 15 until they graduate from high school and then they receive a student exit summary prior to graduating from high school. In addition, absent from the Fostering Connection legislation is a mandate that requires the four elements of transition, which are (a) assessing abilities; (b) future planning; (c) coordinated activities; and (d) setting postsecondary goals (Flexer et al., 2007).

To this end, New York State mandates that school districts pinpoint suitable coordinated and quantifiable activities through career assessments for special education students who are 15 years and older (University of the State of New York, New York State Education Department, 2009). This is relevant to this study because it is hoped that if provided with the appropriate transition services, foster care children’s graduation rate will increase. Transitional goal setting is developed for special education children 15 years and above. Transition activities and services must be implemented to facilitate students’ transition into postsecondary activities, including attending college, on-the-job training, adult living, and the integration into society (National Transition Network, 1996).

According to the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2008), educational success can assist foster children in overcoming the maltreatment and abuse they encountered during their childhood. Meaningful school experiences can augment the welfare of children in foster care. It is crucial to assist foster children in graduating from high school, meeting their postsecondary goals and becoming successful adults. They
will receive satisfaction and a sense of fiscal responsibility as they make a valuable contribution to humanity. Regrettably, the academic outcomes for children in foster care are dismal. Foster care children end up dropping out of high school at a rate of approximately 46% (Carlson, 2008). As this study reveals, foster children are in academic crisis.

In Chapter 2, the literature review investigates the work of three key theorists: Paula Kohler, Sarah Geenen, and Peter Pecora. Each researcher has an extensive background in the field and has made a tremendous contribution to improving the outcomes of children. They examine transitional services from different viewpoints. Yet, there is justification for further research.

Kohler’s taxonomy of transitional programming centers upon the discovery of exemplary practices and programs. These programs have been recognized nationally based on several efficiency standards. Students demonstrate positive outcomes through achieving their postsecondary goal-setting. She obtained and refined her taxonomy from authorities on transition, including special education administrators, transitional specialists, and state transition projects (Kohler, 1993). Hence, these findings provide justification for implementing transition services to special education students due to program effectiveness (Kohler, 1996).

Geenen examined four student populations in the State of Oregon. She compares and analyzes the academic achievements of the special education, general education, and foster care population. Her findings reveal depressing academic results for foster children with disabilities. Moreover, the poor student outcomes are based on several
factors, including too many school changes and the lack of educational supports (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

Conversely, Pecora’s study demonstrates that foster children can obtain comparable results to their general education counterparts if they are provided the necessary resources. Pecora documents the lives of former foster children of the Casey Family Program. He exposes the result of comprehensive service delivery from a private foster care agency. The graduation rate of the Casey Alumni is encouraging (Pecora et al., 2003).

The cumulative research of these three theorists suggests that effective transitional programs for foster children will increase their graduation rate and long-term outcomes. In addition, foster care children despite their instability can become successful adults. Therefore, there is a rationalization for transitional services and postsecondary goal-setting.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to understand the effects of transitional goal-setting and programming on the number of children in foster care who will meet the high school graduation requirement. In addition, this study sought to understand whether transitional services facilitated foster children in their academic achievement. This study examined the experiences of children in foster care for the purposes of understanding their high school academic experiences and the factors that contributed to their making a successful transition into adult life.

A focus group was conducted with college students known to foster care and in-depth interviews was conducted with students who are currently attending college to
learn about their successful transition into adult living. Findings can inspire stakeholders to develop strategies for student improvement. Findings provided invaluable information on the type of educational plans that would increase rates of success. In addition, the study examined the perceptions of foster care children on common problems that impact the graduation rate of children in foster care. Moreover, these students known to foster care were asked to make recommendations regarding how to enhance the academic possibilities for foster care children. Ultimately, the study sought to advance the literature on transitional services and its importance to the academic outcomes of foster care children, offer additional evidence for the use of transitional services, and enhance their academic results through the critical lens of foster children.

**Research Questions**

This dissertation examined, through the words of successful foster children, how transitional goal-setting and programming did or did not help them to meet high school graduation requirements. It explored the degree to which a lack or presence of transitional planning opportunities served as a help or hindrance in their experiences. Several potential research questions emerged: What is the perception of foster care children regarding graduating from high school? What are the significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goals?

**Significance of the Study**

Despite the fact that foster children were integrated into communities, they remained ill prepared to meet the demands of independent living. They continued to require skills that enabled them to sustain themselves and to avoid pitfalls of homelessness, incarceration, and public assistance. Social service agencies had to focus
on removing abused and neglected children from their homes to ensure their safety. As a result, little emphasis is placed on the ongoing learning requirements of children in foster care (Geenen & Powers, 2004).

Foster children emancipate from placement without the essential capacity necessary to lead a quality life. Recent studies similar to those of Geenen and Powers (2004) indicated that children in foster become homeless at a 36% rate, males in foster care experience incarceration at a 25% rate, and children in foster care graduate from high school at a 50% rate. Most foster children will experience living in poverty (They’re All Our Children!, 2007). It is imperative that alternatives are explored to assist foster children enter into adulthood with the essential resources to assist them in leading a successful adult life.

The investigator hopes that foster children will benefit from the recommendations made by foster children regarding the factors that contributed to their graduation from high school and the obstacles they overcame. The information that they provided is invaluable because it focuses on circumstances surrounding their foster care experience, their academic struggles and conditions affecting their standard of living. The findings will improve educational opportunities for foster care children and, ultimately will contribute to their advancement. By establishing a connection between transition services for foster care children, long-term educational planning can be developed, which can enhance their high school graduation rate.
Definition of Terms

*Foster child* is defined as a child that is removed from their biological parents or guardians or in their absence, placed by a foster care agency by court order to reside with individuals to care, support and protect them. (Foster Child, n.d.).

*Foster care* is short or long-term voluntary or involuntary placement of a child who has been removed from their biological family or guardian (New York State Office of Children & Family Services, 2009, Why are children placed in foster care? para. 1).

*Measurable Postsecondary Goals* require that a student’s individualized education program (IEP) be updated annually and include appropriate goals for the student after high school. These goals must commensurate at age 15. Appropriate goals are derived from assessments and include training, more schooling, and a job or career, or independent living skills, if necessary. New York State requires that a plan for transitional services is clearly stated and developed with the student in relationship to their interests and desires as well as their abilities. (University of the State of New York, New York State Education Department, 2010). Transition assessments assist students in determining their interests, preferences and strengths, to facilitate in developing their future aspirations. Assessments help students identify their skills to ensure meeting their postsecondary goals (Johnson, 2002a).

*Taxonomy of Transition Programming* was developed by Paula Kohler and is a plan for providing transitional services for special education students. She notes that student’s academic schedule and services should be coordinated to assist students in meeting their postsecondary goals. She further states that students will reach these goals based on their academic needs and career interest being met (Kohler, 1996).
**Chapter Summary**

This chapter provides a compelling rationale for the need to pursue this research. The focal point of this study is to assist foster children in obtaining a quality life. As foster children continue to experience a life of less than desired results, namely dropping out of high school, transition theory, if applied, can help to improve their educational outcomes and ultimately their lives. The exploration of transitional services for foster children has not been exhausted. After review, three notable theorists’ have emerged as the scholars in the field. Their studies are examined with significant explanation in Chapter 2. This literature review is relevant to the research conundrum and provides a discerning examination of the benefits of transition services. Chapter 3 provides a comprehensive summation of this qualitative study. Furthermore, it delineates the methodology of the study. The results of the study are presented in Chapter 4 and the author’s conclusions are offered in Chapter 5.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Marquise described being placed in foster care following the death of his father who was a drug dealer and his mother’s inability to care for him. Despite his placement in foster care, Marquise was one of 250 students who received transitional services during his senior year of high school. These services were provided by the College Summit Program, which provided counseling and assisted students in completing their college applications. There was a low-income requirement to receive these services as well as students had to have acceptable grade and leadership qualities (Rivera, 2008).

The College Summit Program is a transition service that helps foster-care children to increase their chances of graduation. A program such as this provides the incentive for struggling seniors to go to college, but a student must complete high school in order to enroll in college. Without establishing transitional goals, children in foster care run the risk of not graduating from high school nor meeting their career objectives, which may include going to college. McDonald, Westerfelt, and Paliavin’s 1996 review of 15 studies that focused on the academic accomplishments of foster children is still relevant. Still, 40 years after the first study, fewer foster children graduate from high school, they spend fewer years in school, and they require more job training and often are enrolled in programs for those with special needs. (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). In his study on foster children, Blome found that they did not participate in programs that would prepare them for college (1997). The critical period of transition, going from high school and on to
adulthood, is difficult for a young person. This factor can be attributed to a lack of resources and financial support (Berzin, 2008). In his research, Blome discovered that foster children dropped out of high school more frequently than children residing with at least one of their parents due to their high school experiences.

Former foster children interviewed by Baltimore Research for the Maryland Public Policy Institute recommended transitional services in support of improving the high school graduation rate. Specifically they recommended tutors, counselors, and planning of long-term educational goals as some of the factors that contribute towards the enhancement of instruction for foster care children. Additionally, foster care parents recommended mentor programs, tutoring, and counseling among the factors for educational improvement (Maryland Public Policy Institute, 2006). In a study conducted for the Casey National Alumni, Pecora et al. (2003) found that if children in foster care are afforded the necessary supports in high school, than they could graduate at rates similar to their general education peers.

There are several theorists that support the practices of transitional services regarding assisting students in meeting their postsecondary goals, for example, Geenen and Powers (2004) have examined foster youth with disabilities. Kohler’s (1996) taxonomy of transition programming connects investigation to practical applications. In her research Kohler (1996) notes that New York is among the states that are known to provide transitional services to their special education student population. Pecora et al. (2006) have reported extensively on the findings of former foster children previously known to the Casey Foundation. While these theorists are noted for their extensive research background, their research supports the connection between transitional
planning of high school students and their meeting their postsecondary goals. Their research findings show a correlation between school transitional activities and meeting post–high school goals. In short, their research substantiates those students who receive transitional services graduate from high school. Foster children require support to succeed academically. Unfortunately, foster children’s graduation rate is being negatively influenced by lack of transitional planning opportunities.

Kohler (1996), Pecora et al. (2006), and Geenen and Powers (2004) address transition theory, which supports meeting postsecondary goals by providing transitional services to students to assist them in graduating from high school and meeting their post-school objectives (National Transition Network, 1996, p. 1). Kohler (1996) suggests that instructional activities should support students’ meeting their post-secondary goals based on their career objectives. She has identified exemplary transitional practices which focus on student outcomes. The improvement of instruction and the achievement of high school students are based on organized actions also known as transition services. Transitional services places emphasis on a coordination of activities that lead to career attainment including, on-the-job training, skill building, and continuing education (National Transition Network, 1996. p. 1).

In a review for the National Transition Alliance of empirical research focused on repositioning into adulthood for special education students, Kohler identified five factors that were related to positive results for special education students. These factors are (a) student driven; (b) postsecondary goals, (c) family participation, (d) neighborhood services, and (e) agenda strategies (Kohler & Chapman, 1999).
Student must face the prospect of entering adulthood. They must make a shift from high school to life beyond graduation. There are countless variables that must be considered to influence students’ ability to reach their career objectives. Transitional results can be inspired through traits of the student and family, economic circumstances, and community environments. Also, the availability of services plays a major role in transitional outcomes. Exemplar transitional services underscore the emergence of attributes targeted at goal attainment. The transition practice recognizes that stakeholders must assist student in meeting their career objectives by developing their skills (Kohler & Field, 2003; Kohler, DeStefano, Wermuth, Grayson, & McGinty, 1994).

Pecora et al. (2006) identified specific predictors of foster care children graduating from high school. Of 15 or more variables examined, the significant indicators, as noted in the abstract, included a reduction of placements, involvement in transitional services, and adult skill-building development. Recommendations were given for directions in educational and vocational preparation.

Pecora et al.’s (2006) variables and predictors will serve as a guide to identify themes in interviews of foster care high school graduates. Predictors of high school graduation included “older age of entry into the child welfare system, . . . fewer placement changes, youth employment experience while in care, independent living experience while in care, and less criminal behavior” (pp. 225, 227). Other variables were “gender; ethnicity; chronological variables, such as age at entry and time between first child welfare placement and entering Casey; birth family background variables; medical and psychological history; adoption and termination of parental rights; reasons for placement in out-of-home care; maltreatment characteristics; services provided; became
pregnant or impregnated a partner; criminal activity in care; kinship care provided; relationship with Casey staff; relationship with last (or longest) foster family; number of placement disruptions” (p. 226).

Findings from the Fostering Futures study conducted by Geenen and Powers (2004) reveal that special education students who are also foster children compared to the special education only population tend to lack transitional plans to address their postsecondary goals. In addition, the planning for foster care children to graduation from high school is improbable and they have considerable less comprehensive goals. There are similarities between the foster care children and special-education student populations regarding their deficits, however, the expectations regarding these populations are dissimilar. The expectancy for foster care children is inferior. In order that foster children who receive special education services can improve they circumstances, their caretakers must believe that they have the capacity of achieving their postsecondary educational goals (Geenen & Powers, 2004).

Geenen and Powers’ method directly extends the transition theory as discussed by Kohler, (1996), which highlights postsecondary results for special education students. The transitional theory is relevant as it focuses upon the connection between school experiences and the postsecondary transition (Kohler, 1996). Pecora et al. (2006) emphasize the transition model, which focuses on participation in extracurricular activities, independent living training, and educational and/or vocational preparation. Geenen, Powers, and Lopez-Vasquez (2001) go even further regarding obstacles that affect the traditional customs surrounding student’s ability to transition into
postsecondary activities through transitional planning. These customs include, character development, and society assimilation.

**Review of the Literature**

There are many commentaries that described why transition services should be considered an effective tool for promoting postsecondary goals. An expert literature base has expanded on the subject of transitional services for foster children. While there have been legislation and initiatives to improve the educational outcomes of special education students, legislation regarding transition services for foster children still requires attention and enhancement.

Kohler’s (1996) work on transitional services began in 1995; however, this conceptual model extends previous work on transition theory that dates back to 1984. The Bridges from School to Working Life concept was introduced by the United States Department of Education. The University of Illinois and The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS, U.S. Department of Education, 1984), worked collaboratively through a joint agreement to develop this concept to assist individuals with disabilities receive on-the-job training. Kohler (1996), Pecora et al. (2006), and Geenen and Powers (2004) have focused their transition theory to assist foster children and special education children meet their postsecondary goals, including graduating from high school. This dissertation investigates transition theory as a tool to assist children in foster care meet the high school graduation requirement.

The taxonomy of transition programming (Kohler, 1996), is a theoretical structure that supports promoting students meeting their post-school goals including attending college, getting a job, receiving training, and becoming self-sufficient. The taxonomy
model provides a context that is designed to focus on educational programs that reflect a transitional perspective. The attributes of this program model include character enhancement, student involvement, family participation, and agency integration. For the purposes of student planning and development, Kohler and Field (2003) encourage transitional collaborations between students and neighborhood organizations.

Kohler’s transitional indoctrination encourages an individualized academic program with the intention of meeting a student’s needs based on their capability, aptitude, and autonomy. Kohler further states that transitional planning is basis for the development of services and activities not an appendage of actions for students. In addition, this model has a history with college-bound students. While Kohler’s concentration was on students with disabilities, this dissertation sought to establish similarities regarding students with disabilities and foster care children, further justifying that children in foster care should receive similar services. This support would improve the meeting of graduation requirements for both student populations.

**Kohler’s taxonomy of transition programming.** The taxonomy of transition programming is a conceptual model that links theoretical and analytical models with the practice of transition. Before undertaking the taxonomy, Kohler and colleagues (Rusch, Kohler, & Rubin, 1992) analyzed more than 300 model transition programs that had been started in response to the OSERS initiative. Specific projects were identified that provided on-the-job training, services, activities, and an evaluation of the program to determine its effectiveness.

Next, Kohler evaluated studies connected to transition programming. She examined 49 articles on transitional services for special education students. She reviewed
exemplar programs in all areas of transitional programming including, on-the-job training with stipends, student involvement, parent participation, personalized services, vocational enthusiasm, independent skill building and neighborhood integration (Kohler, 1993). Subsequently, Kohler et al. (1994) investigated 15 evaluative studies. The studies that were examined represented model transitional programs. Kohler reviewed effectiveness based on consistency regarding measurable program aspects. She pinpointed those aspects of programming that would lead to higher academic results. As a result, effective transition practices were identified. The effectiveness of these practices was supported by relevant data established by Peters and Heron (1993). These practices were substantiated by theorists in their studies. Theories were supported by documented post-school outcomes (Kohler, 1996). The taxonomy expected to (a) identify best transitional practices, (b) present a comprehensive transitional structure for replication, and (c) validate the transitional services model based on outcomes.

Kohler used a model of conceptualization that was developed by Trochim and Linton (see Kohler, 1996) to develop the taxonomy. This model included three components: (a) the steps necessary to complete the conceptualization, (b) the points of view of the various study participants, and (c) the outcomes. There were three phases that completed the study. In Phase I, there was a generation of the concept, which involved identifying the research relevant to transition practices. In Phase II research was reviewed, sorted, and rated, and clusters of concepts were developed. In Phase III the organized concepts from the previous phase were evaluated by participants using statistical analysis and social validation.
The model developed by Kohler (1996) resulted in five categories: “student development, student-focused planning, interagency collaboration, family involvement, and program structures and attributes” (Discussion, para. 2). The essential categories included components of transitional services which supported input from the student, as well as, family members (Kohler, 1996). In all of the categories eight practices were rated the best: “(a) student participation in planning, (b) student involvement in decision making, (c) planning process is student-centered, (d) planning decisions driven by student and family, (e) individual planning team includes student, parents, school personnel, and appropriate related or adult services personnel, (f) parent/family attendance at the IEP meeting, (g) active parent/family participation in the planning process, and (h) information to parents/families provided in their ordinary language” (Kohler, 1996, Implications para. 2). Student involvement and planning were of the greatest significance. Accordingly Kohler recommends that this information regarding transitional services should be included in formulation of IEPs.

**Youths with disabilities in foster care.** The purpose of Geenen and Powers (2006) research was to compare the performance of four student populations. These populations included students that were foster children, students with disabilities, general education students, and students with disabilities and simultaneously in foster care. The study examined 327 children within an urban Oregon school district ranging in age from 13 to 21. Data was gathered about the foster children’s experiences in foster care as adolescents. This data included, number, type, and length of placements, Foster children in special education performed poorly in comparison to the other groups.
Using data from the Child Welfare, Oregon Youth Authority and the Oregon Division of Human Services, Geenen and Powers (2006) found 158 foster children meeting the selection criteria within the target area. The students with disabilities represented 44% of the 158 children in foster care. This represented the students with disabilities group; the balance of these students represented the children in foster care only group. Available data for the foster youths in special education showed that “29% of these youths had a primary disability of emotional disturbance; 19% had a physical disability (that is, orthopedic, hearing or vision impairment or both, or other health impaired); 44% had a learning disability; 4% had a cognitive disability (mental retardation, autism); and 4% had a communication disorder” (Geenen & Powers, 2006, p. 235). Another grouping of 81 students was selected that was comprised of students with disabilities only. This special education population used the stratified sampling criterion. Their disabilities were proportionally similar in kind to the foster care special education group. The general education student population of 88 students whom were neither students with disabilities nor children in care were randomly selected.

Academic variables used by Geenen and Powers were “(1) cumulative grade point average on a 0.00 to 4.00 grading system; (2) number of days absent (year to date); (3) cumulative earned credits toward graduation (22 required); (4) number of schools attended in student’s career; (5) number of grades retained; (6) performance on standardized state testing in math and reading . . . ; and (7) exemption rates on state testing” (2006, p. 235).

Geenen and Powers (2006) found that foster care children and students with disabilities suffered academically in comparison to their general education student
counterparts. For children in foster care, this could be attributed to their frequent changes in placements, which impacted their meeting the high school graduation requirement.

Student outcomes demonstrated that children in care with disabilities achieved poor academic performance. They trailed their peer group in tests of academic achievement, and success was hindered by a large number of roadblocks to their progress.

Among the effects that Geenen and Powers (2006) identified as a result of their research were negative impacts and risks that seemed to multiply because of their interrelatedness. The net effect of being in placement and receiving special education services had a greater impact on students than if each factor were taken alone. For instance foster children with disabilities experience a higher placement turnover than foster youth. In addition, adjustments to different settings and the new schools where they are placed typically are slow to react, “dropping the ball” on IEPs and service adjustments.

Geenen and Powers (2006) recommend that experiences of foster-care children and those with disabilities be given higher priority. Teachers and child welfare workers, must devote more resources and time, and focus on the details of the meeting the requirements of children in care. Geenen and Powers chose to have child welfare identify the target population of this study to the school systems, because collectively “the school district and child welfare could not identify this group from their own records. Educators need to know which students are in foster care, and child welfare professionals need to have information about a youth’s disability needs and involvement in special education” (Geenen & Powers, 2006, p. 240).
The Casey National Alumni Study. The purpose of the Casey National Alumni Study was to ascertain whether children in foster care benefitted from the many services that they received while in placement in Casey foster homes (Pecora et al., 2003). Casey is known for allocating greater services to foster children than other foster care agencies are known to do. The study asked the question were the services instrumental in fostering better results for foster children previously in care in a Casey foster home. (Pecora et al., 2003).

The Casey study reviewed foster children’s files and interviewed former foster children who were in Casey foster homes between 1966 and 1998. This research addressed two questions:

(1) What are the educational achievements of maltreated youth placed in Casey foster care? Do they differ from other adults with regard to educational achievements? (2) Are there key factors or programme components, such as placement stability, mental health services, group work, employment training and employment experience that are linked particularly with better high school completion rates while youth are in foster care? (Pecora et al., 2006, p. 222)

The case records provided data about the alumni which included “alumni demographics, dates of entry and exit from foster care, replacement rates, some foster family information, type of exit from foster care, reasons for original child placement, child maltreatment, and some information about one or both birth parents, including family composition, parent functioning, drug and alcohol usage, and termination of parental rights” (Pecora et al., 2003, p. 12). Two criteria for inclusion in the study were placement for more than one year with a Casey foster family and discharged from foster care for a
minimum of one year prior to the study. There was a large rate of response (73%) to requests for interviews among the 1,609 alumni.

Participants were 54% female and 35% minorities. Their first placement was at the average age of 8.9 years and the average age when interviewed was 30.5. Participants were from 20 to 51 years old. Although the sample size was large, among those not interviewed were 62 children (3.9%) who were deceased at the time of the study, 55 incarcerated (3.4%), 11 (0.7%) who were currently in psychiatric or other institutions. Twenty percent of the former foster children were unlocatable and 3.9% refused to be interviewed. Therefore, the participants were 1,087 (Pecora et al., 2003, pp. 12–13).

Many of the alumni (37.9%) required additional classes or extra help to complete their education. A substantial number repeated grades (36.2%). Approximately 67.6% of the Casey alumni attended a minimum of three elementary schools. At least 33.1% went to as many as five elementary schools (Pecora et al., 2006, p. 223). Most important for this study,
a substantial proportion (72.5%) of the Casey alumni had received a high-school diploma or GED by the time their case closed. The high school completion rate at follow-up was even higher: 86.1% (including those who obtained a GED). . . . If we just include Casey alumni ages 25 years and older, the rate increases to 87.8%, substantially higher than the 80.4% completion rate of the US general population. (p. 223)

The success among Casey Alumni could be attributed to staff and foster parents working with foster children to improve their academic abilities. Casey alumni received “targeted educational advocacy, integrated social work and education case management, and
continuous monitoring of education outcomes” (Pecora et al., 2003, p. 27). In addition, of importance was the formation of supportive relationships, the consistent administration of educational assessments, and the availability of tutoring or other key supports (Seyfried, Pecora, Downs, Levine, & Emerson, 2000).

**Chapter Summary**

Three key research studies on the subject of transitional services were highlighted in the literature review in order to view the topic from various perspectives. Kohler investigated exemplary programs and showed positive student results. Geenen conducted a study that compared outcomes of transitional services for children in foster care, students with disabilities, children in foster care who also are students with disabilities, and the general education populations. Pecora reviewed data of Casey alumni who previously received foster care services.

Kohler maintains that transition services are an underpinning from which high school programs and activities should be cultivated. The taxonomy helps the entire community, including special education administrators, transition specialists, and state transition projects, to identify exemplary national transitional practices and programs. Transitional programming is supported by positive postsecondary student outcomes and based on information received from experts in the field (Kohler, 1996). These findings justify the implementation of transition services to foster children equivalent to those available to special education students.

Geenen and Power’s study examines four student populations in the State of Oregon in the area of transitional services. While transitional services were provided to all identified populations, the findings indicated that the foster child with a disability had
dismal results. Geenen’s study attributed these results to instability in foster care, such as a change in schools, integrating into a different academic environment, and school systems failure to provide transitional services as mandated by a student’s IEP (Geenen & Powers, 2006).

Pecora et al.’s study, on the other hand, demonstrated that if foster children received appropriate services and supports, their outcomes would be similar to those of their general education counterparts. In the Casey Alumni study, the foster care agency provided and devoted more resources to foster children, including child assessment, case planning, intervention strategies, and ancillary services, with an emphasis on extracurricular activities, independent living and educational and/or vocational training (Pecora et al., 2003).

In summary, Kohler suggests that the perceptions of students regarding their transition experience should be pursued. Foster care children must be engaged in exemplary transitional practices through their foster care agencies. Gaps in public school system student services because of foster children’s changes in school must be addressed. As Pecora et al.’s study indicates, public and private foster care agencies must replicate effective service delivery that is connected to long-term outcomes. Successful transitional planning rests with foster care agencies that maintain continuity. This is consistent with the mandate initiated by the Fostering Connections Act, whereby foster care agencies must establish a transition plan 90 days before emancipation. However, 90 days is woefully inadequate to prepare for transitioning into adult life. While there will be some overlapping of services for special education services, all foster children require transitional planning in order to meet their postsecondary goals and to have better long-
term results. Therefore, foster care agencies must provide assurances that students receive transitional services. In addition, they must assist in improving the independent living skills of foster children. As William C. Bell, President and CEO of Casey Family Programs noted in an address to the Graduate School of Social Sciences at Fordham University, “It was Frederick Douglass who once said, ‘it’s easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.’ He knew preparation during one’s developing years was one of the keys to a successful adulthood” (Bell, 2009 para.5).
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

Chapter 3 is a summation of the qualitative methodology that was employed in this research. The researcher was able to draw upon important conclusions based upon data regarding the connection between foster children receiving transition services and the obtainment of postsecondary outcomes. The purpose of this research was to ascertain whether there was an association between foster children who attend college and transition goal setting and, further, to understand the extent to which transitional services are critical to the educational accomplishment of foster care children. This was a qualitative study intended to help foster care students, despite their circumstances, reach postsecondary goals similar to those of the general education student population. Foster children age out of care lacking basic skills to survive. To assist foster children become successful adults, the first step is to develop a plan. The plan is a blueprint that includes meeting the high school graduation requirement and meeting postsecondary goals, such as going to college, or developing vocational readiness skills, in the quest to become independent. Hence, this study defined and evaluated transitional services as a means to improve the graduation rate of children placed in foster care.

This study sought to enhance our understanding of the lives of college students who are foster children and to learn about their educational experiences. The opinions of this population were used to assist with the identification of problems that prevent them from meeting the graduation requirement. By interviewing children in foster care who
met the high school graduation requirement, the understanding of what impedes and aids their graduation rates was deepened so that these insights may be applied to solutions within the community and provides direction for further studies. The goal of the interviews was to provide data necessary to determine whether transitional services aided in helping children in foster care meet the graduation requirement.

Qualitative research is a collection of data and then develops theories based on that data. The dissertation examined, through the words of successful foster children, how transitional goal-setting and programming did or did not help them to meet high school graduation requirements. The problem statement asked whether the high school graduation rate of children in foster care was negatively or positively influenced by transitional planning. To what extent were predictors and variables identified by Pecora (Pecora et al. 2003; 2006) factors in the respondent’s lives? How were their goals for postsecondary education, independent living skills, and other life goals influenced by caseworkers, educators, families, foster care providers, and others?

Maxwell (2005) describes reflexivity as the fact that investigator is a part of the entity that is being studied. Consequently, Maxwell notes that there is an undeniable disadvantage for influence or bias in the research. In this study the researcher is a foster parent who has an extensive background working with foster children, which includes 17 years of experience. Moreover, the researcher recently adopted five children. As a result, the researcher’s passion is in assisting foster children. In addition, the researcher is an educational administrator for over 20 years. Thereby, the researcher is both an insider and outsider, as described by Herr and Anderson (2005), regarding positionality. The researcher was an insider in the foster care system and public educational system, but
an outsider in the higher institution system. Insiders are known to have a hidden agenda for problem solving (Herr & Anderson, 2005). The researcher safeguarded against personal bias by developing open-ended interview questions that were outlined within the questionnaire, recording each interview, and allowing each participant to maintain their own voice. In addition the researcher utilized a research assistant to help analyze the data. As anticipated, a relationship emerged among the investigator and interviewees, as described by Maxwell (2005).

**Research Context**

Each participant is currently a foster child within a foster care agency located in the New York City Metropolitan area, (referred to hereafter as the agency). While they attend college, they continue to reside with foster parents even if it is only during their school breaks.

Interviewees came from various circumstances. Nevertheless the vast majority were African or Caribbean American or Hispanic/Latino. Each participant appeared to be honest and candid regarding their foster care experience. The interview questions centered on two major categories of inquiry:

1. What helped them to meet their goal to graduate from high school?
2. What hindered them from potentially not graduating from high school?

The researcher set the tone for establishing an honest, open and straightforward dialogue with each participant.

Access to this population was coordinated by the referral source. A conference room at the agency was provided to conduct the interviews. Students were able to meet with agency personnel for various reasons as well as contribute to this research,
Research Participants

The researcher submitted the informed consent and student assent forms to the agency referral. The researcher received permission to interview foster children at the agency through the agency referral source. The researcher was informed that there were 24 foster children within the agency who attend college. Each participant was currently in foster care through the agency. As a benefit to high school and college students in care, foster children are encouraged to pursue postsecondary goals with the assistance of their educational specialist. Prior to the interviews 24 foster children were contacted by the referral source who made arrangements for the participants to come to the agency to be interviewed as part of the study. The sample population was selected based on a purposeful selection criterion.

The sample population was chosen from the educational specialist’s caseload. On May 13, 2011, the educational specialist had a caseload that included 23 foster children in college, one in the army, eight seniors in high school, one junior in high school, two in the GED program, and one in job corps making a total of 36 foster children. Subsequently, the researcher focused her energies toward interviewing those students who were either attending college or were enlisted in the army. At that point, the educational specialist contacted the 24 foster children to determine their interest and availability to participate. Initially she heard from five foster children who expressed their interest in being interviewed. At that time it was agreed that these first five participants would be interviewed in a focus group. However, on the day of the focus group interview, one participant cancelled. Fortunately, she expressed her continued
interest in being interviewed, as a result, she was one of the participants that were interviewed on a later date.

**Participants who participated in the individual interviews.** Following the focus group interview, 13 other foster children who attended college were interviewed in face-to-face interviews from May 12, 2011, to May 31, 2011. The same 31 interview questions asked during the focus group interview were asked during each of the individual interviews. The interviews ranged in length between 20 minutes and 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded and entries were made into a journal. In total the sample consisted of 17 foster children, which yielded a 71% interview rate.

**Participants who participated in focus groups.** The focus group interview was held on May 11, 2011, at the agency. After consents were signed, each member of the focus group provided their perceptions in response to 31 interview questions. The focus group interview was completed in about 90 minutes. The focus group discussion was taped and recorded.

It was because the agency had an educational specialist who coordinated the educational services for high school and college students that the focus of this study included participants in their care. The writer sought the assistance from the several foster care agencies but they either declined their involvement in the study because their students in college were not organized or they considered any involvement in this study a violation of their foster children’s confidentiality. According to the agency’s educational specialist, other agencies also have an education specialist. She described her role as an education specialist as regarding assisting foster children to meet their postsecondary goals on the high school and college level. The age range for these foster children was
from 14 to 21 years old. She stated that her primary focus is to assist youth to get into and stay in college. The education specialist has a provisional school counseling certification. She has a master’s degree in Counseling and a bachelor’s degree in Psychology. Prior to becoming an educational specialist she provided training to children in foster care to assist them in becoming self-sufficient. In this capacity, she was responsible for ensuring that foster children were discharged to stable living condition and assisted them in identifying ongoing supportive networks.

The researcher included college students known to the foster care system within this study. The participants must have (a) met the high school graduation requirement; (b) been in placement in foster care for a minimum of one year, residing either in a foster or group home, or residential facility; and (c) had no prior relationship with the researcher. These foster children were willing to discuss their painful circumstances despite the stigmas associated with being a foster child. Typically, many foster children are in denial of their circumstances, and it is a continual challenge for them to accept being either abandoned or neglected by the parents that they continue to love and dream about.

The screening of the foster care children was through a purposeful selection criterion. The purposeful selection criterion is a strategy that researchers use when they deliberately chose individuals to participate in the study, to collect information for research. This approach is used as the best way to acquire essential data that would be difficult to obtain through other methodologies (Maxwell, 2005). The purposeful selection criterion was obtained to gather a cross section of individuals with regard to gender, race, and socioeconomic status to capture a broad range of perspectives.
Instruments Used in Data Collection

The instrument that was used for the purpose of this research was an in-depth interview questionnaire. This instrument was suitable for the foster care population and agency setting. The purpose of conducting the focus group interview and face-to-face interviews was to gather descriptions of foster children’s academic experience in their own words. Through a purposeful selection criterion, interviewees were asked 31 questions, with follow-up questions, regarding their educational experience. The questions explored the extent to which students who are in foster care viewed transitional services as a factor in their academic success. Goodman (2001) notes that interview questions should be asked in a standardized, open-ended format. In addition, there was flexibility integrated into the interviewing process to permit the recording of interview and documentation of unexpected revelations that emerged during the interviews.

The researcher developed this interview questionnaire, which was influenced by questions raised by deFur (2004), in response to the intent of the IDEA regulations regarding the transitional service needs of special education high school students. This instrument was pretested on high school students. The researcher sought to determine whether the questionnaire provided clear instructions and wording, adequate responses, appropriate length of interview, and relevant questions. Modifications were made to the instrument as needed to ensure reliability based upon the pretest (Roberts, 2004, pp. 138–139). The pretest used a sample size of five students to test the validity of the research method. After the pretest was completed, the investigator facilitated a focus group interview of college students. The focus group was a sample of four current foster care children.
In this qualitative study 17 college students who attended colleges, but were in foster care, were interviewed. This research design utilized a newly developed interview questionnaire, which fosters the descriptive research study. The rationale for the selection of interview method centers on its effectiveness on gathering data in qualitative research as stated by Patton (1990) and to effectively obtain the perceptions of the research participants. Moreover, the researcher sought to gather the opinions and insights of participants regarding their educational experiences. The selection criterion included targeted college students who are foster children and attend various colleges through the region.

The student’s participation in the focus group setting provided data that enabled the researcher to establish triangulation. Patton (2009) indicates that triangulation is a method that ascertains dependability and trustworthiness by collecting data in multiple methods. Therefore, data from face-to-face, individual, in-depth interviews and the participants’ focus group interview was utilized to validate the questionnaire, which was administered by the researcher and was scored by a research assistant. The responses were placed into categories for coding. Patton (2009) describes coding as subcategories which are grouped by themes.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) note that by utilizing the interview method valuable information is ascertained through a connection that is formed between the researcher and participant. The creation of data in the qualitative interview is dependent on the skills of the interviewer and the interviewer’s ability to pose questions. Sensitivity to the “social relationship of the interviewer interviewee . . . rests on the interviewer’s ability to create a stage where the subject is free and safe to talk of private events” and where there is “a
delicate balance between the interviewer’s concern for pursuing interesting knowledge and ethical respect for the integrity of the interview subject” (p. 16). This method of qualitative research relies on Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) grounded theory. Grounded theory is defined by Creswell (2007) as “a qualitative research design in which the researcher generates a general explanation . . . of a procedure, action, or interaction shaped by the views of . . . participants” (p. 63). Grounded theory was designed and developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967. These theorists held that research “should be ‘grounded’ in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people” (Creswell, 2007, p. 63).

The researcher maintained participant’s confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher selected the interviewing method because it is believed that this research methodology would yield dependable and justifiable results. In addition, the analysis of the data was straightforward and explored the relationship between foster children who received transitional services and met the graduation requirement.

A pretest was conducted in a focus group on five high school students. Informed parent consents and student assent forms were hand delivered to each student on April 28, 2011. Parents were notified how they could reach the researcher should they have any questions. Students were instructed to bring signed parent consent forms with them to the focus group. The interview questionnaire was pretested on a focus group of five high school students on May 5, 2011 (See Appendix A for the interview questionnaire.). This process helped the researcher to modify interview questions and prepare for the interviews. Informed consent (Appendix B) detailing the rationale for the study and student assent forms (Appendix C) was obtained prior to conducting the interviews. The
informed consent assured participants that confidentiality would be maintained and their personal identity would not be released in either the dissertation or by researcher. Data was collected utilizing an in-depth questionnaire consisting of 31 questions with follow-up questions. The questionnaire was administered during a pretest of high school students to establish its validity. Thereafter, a focus group of four college students who are current foster children and attend college and 13 college students were interviewed individually. The interviews were recorded and copious notes were taken. The researcher maintained careful records of informed consents, student assents, questionnaires, interview schedules, and data charts regarding the recording of the data (Roberts, 2004).

This qualitative study utilized SPSS to collect, organize and analyze the data from the research. SPSS is a software package useful for analyzing information. The researcher conducted the traditional qualitative analysis utilizing the cut and sort method based on grounded theory. This method has been supported by Ryan and Bernard (2000) in their article, “Techniques to Identify Themes.” The researcher went through each interview transcription and pulled out any quotations that held information regarding the research questions. In this process the researcher pulled, quotation by quotation, excerpts that were relevant to the research questions. The researcher pulled the words verbatim from the responses. These quotations were put into Excel, analyzed, and coded into themes. The quotations are what created the themes. For example, the first time that a participant stated that they had to “focus in high school,” a theme for focus was created. Thereafter, every time “focus” came up, it was represented in the number next to the quotations. In short, the data analysis was the quotations which correspond to themes.
Field notes and journal entries. In addition to recording each interview, the researcher documented relevant information regarding circumstances that could have had an impact on the research outcome as it occurred during the pretest, focus group interview, and face-to-face interviews. These field notes were taken while the researcher conducted interviews. They described what was happening during the interviews, and included descriptions of the reactions of each individual being interviewed: their level of comfort, displeasure, or their enthusiasm while sharing pertinent information. In addition, the researcher’s impressions, observations, feelings, conditions, and responses were recorded in a journal. The journal was maintained to describe what the researcher was feeling while conducting this qualitative study.

Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

As indicated by Patton (2009), the researcher started the grounded theory with the use of the cut and sort method for coding through the examination of transcripts for distinct and separate segments including ideas or experiences of each participant. This information was then coded into different subcategories. The transcripts and data were examined for the purpose of identifying relationships between the categories identified. Additional examination recognized relationships between ideas and indicators. In addition, emerging themes were coded and cross analyzed. The researcher looked at the ideas or themes of categories and subcategories. There was a constant comparison to refine the categories (Patton, 2009). Patton notes that grounded theory research can be referred to as an inductive method of analysis, which can lead to theories of behavior through consideration and analysis of data and by systematically developing categories based on their properties and dimensions. In addition, during this qualitative research,
results emerged during careful consideration and analysis of data. This qualitative research consisted of constant comparisons between the data received from each participant. The researcher used the SPSS software package to collect, organize and analyze data to report the results of the study.

The researcher followed a sequence of analyzing and interpreting the research data as detailed by Cronk (2008). The analysis determined what ideas came out of questions asked of the participants. The participants’ stories are presented in this chapter. The following is the step-by-step description of the grounded theory process that the investigator used to perform this qualitative research.

The individual interviews and focus group interview were transcribed. The investigator coded the data employing the cut and sort method which is based on grounded theory of coding and identifying themes. The cut and sort method of theme identification is a common data analysis method in qualitative research. This method of coding has been discussed by Ryan and Bernard in their article on “Techniques to Identify Themes in Qualitative Data” (2000). To this end, the researcher went through each interview transcription, isolating relevant quotations from the transcriptions while preserving essential context, and placed the quotations in Excel for theme identification. The benefit of this coding method is that the participants’ own words were preserved.

The next stage of the data analysis process was to the themes into five categories based on individual and focus group interviews. The categories are: (a) sources of help (intrinsic), (b) sources of help (extrinsic), (c) sources of struggle (intrinsic), (d) sources of struggle (extrinsic), (e) and interactions with foster care agency. Through a data analysis intrinsic and extrinsic themes emerged. The major themes are organized into help and
difficulties. These categories were further divided into sources of help that are intrinsic and sources of help that are intrinsic. The word help has a meaning of helping participants to graduate from high school. Throughout the interview process the underlying questions were what helped and what hindered participants to graduate from high school. As a result, the interview questions were divided into what helped the participants that were within their control and what helped them that were outside of their control. Simultaneously, the questions were divided into what hindered them that was inside their control and what hindered them that were outside of their control. Refer to Theme Categories and Themes in Appendix D.

Summary of the Methodology

The research design methodology was clearly explained in this chapter. The following is a synopsis of the elements outlined in this qualitative study. The research design was an interview instrument. The rationale for the selection of this instrument was that it is a valuable tool in qualitative research and is appropriate for the student population (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the advantages of a face-to-face interview are that interview methodology is an effective method of gathering data, it can be taped, and the interviewer can pick up on body language to obtain more thorough and detailed responses.

The population and sample participants included college students who are foster children. The sample size consisted of 17 participants who were interviewed at an agency located in New York City. The study used a purposeful selection criterion, which enabled a cross-section of participants to give perceptions and opinions of their education experiences. The interview instrument was field tested on a focus group with high school
students for validity and reliability. The researcher is a foster parent and is an educational administrator, making her an insider and an outsider (positionality), and a part of the world being studied (reflexivity); thereby, there are concerns for bias, which were addressed by allowing students to have their own voice in response to open ended questions. Thus, the researcher believed that her background provided an advantage while interviewing the foster care population and that valuable information emerged during the in-depth interviews. The questionnaire was administered by the researcher face-to-face and scored by an assistant researcher. The data was collected through recording and note taking at a foster care agency. Student names will be kept confidential and will not be revealed in dissertation or to others as outlined in the informed consent. Grounded theory was the method that was utilized for collecting data. This approach is referred to in research as being “grounded” in data (Creswell, 2007).

The data analysis included coding. SPSS software was utilized to complete, organize and analyze the findings of the study. A limitation of the study was the generalization of the results.

According to Maxwell (2005) there are four key elements to a research design, (a) the relationship that emerges among the investigator and the interviewees, (b) the location of the research site and participants, (c) the data collection methodology, and (d) the techniques and strategies utilized for data analysis. These components, coupled with techniques for guaranteeing validity, provide a foundation for exploring research and formulating research questions. These key elements are designed to allow for some flexibility in response to the variability of the process. These key elements have been included in the research design as outlined above.
In summary, this chapter provides a recipe for duplication by other investigators. It clearly outlines and substantiates the qualitative methodology. Roberts (2004) states that each step in the research design should be comprehensible and explained in full detail. The methodology is the blueprint of the research study which should be straightforward and thorough. Hence, it is a part of the dissertation journey.
Chapter 4: Results

This chapter reveals the findings from a phenomenological study which utilized the qualitative method. This qualitative study examined the perceptions of foster children in care within *the agency*. The participants have graduated from high school and are pursuing their postsecondary goals. The majority of the students was college students, will be attending college during the next semester, or was working towards attending college. One student was in the armed forces and planned to pursue college as a benefit from being in the military.

The 13 participants that were interviewed individually in this study were 12 females and 1 male, ranging in age from 17 to 21 years old. Participants identified themselves as African American Black, Dominican, Haitian/African American, Hispanic, and Puerto Rican. Participants’ average foster care placement ranged from 3 years up to 15 years. The average stay was 7 years. Participants’ foster-care placements ranged from 1 to 10 placements. The average number of placements was 4. Four participants graduated from high school in 2009, seven in 2010 and two in 2011. Of the 13 participants, 4 were classified special education. Participants’ high school grade-point average ranged between 69 and 88%. At the time of the interviews, 5 participants were attending a two-year college, 7 participants were attending a four-year college and 1 participant was in the armed forces. Participants’ college majors included business administration, communication disorders, communication/journalism, computer graphics, criminal justice, information technology, liberal arts, and nursing.
The focus group participants in this research were three females and one male, ranging in age from 18 to 20 years old. Participants identified themselves as African, Black, French/Black/West Indian, and Hispanic/other. One participant was in foster care for 15 years while the other three were in foster care for no more than 4 years. The foster care placements were also up to 4 years. Two participants graduated from high school in 2010, one in 2008, and one in 2011. Of the four participants, one was classified as a special education student. Participants’ high school grade-point average ranged from 69% to 80%. At the time of the interview, two participants were attending a four-year college, one participant attended a two-year college, one was majoring in acting/dance, one in digital graphics design, and one in nursing. Each participant had a postsecondary goal.

The purpose of this research was to examine the educational experiences of college students who were foster children, successfully completed high school, and went on to become productive citizens in society. Qualitative methods were used to extend existing research on transitional planning as a tool for increasing the likelihood of success among children in foster care settings.

This study sought to (a) determine whether there is a relationship between children in foster care who graduated from high school and transition goal setting and (b) to understand the extent to which transitional services are critical to the academic success of foster care children. This research examined the experiences of foster care children for the purpose of understanding their high school educational experiences and the impact that the experiences had on making a successful transition into college life. The foster
children that participated in this study are currently foster children at the agency. The demographics of the agency include a predominantly minority foster care population.

The agency is a multifaceted social service organization that is dedicated to caring for children in placement. This social service agency provides services to families in the foster care. The agency provides comprehensive services to needy children. They provide a safe and nurturing environment to foster children. Historically the agency provided services to approximately 1,200 children in care on a regular basis. The foster children placed in the residential component range in age between the ages 7 to 14 years old. In addition, the agency operated 11 group homes throughout New York. The agency also provides youngsters the opportunity to reside in families in foster homes. Lastly, the agency facilitates adoption services. Foster parents adopt most of the foster children in their care.

Currently the agency is faced with challenges that require the closing of their campus program. However, the foster boarding homes and therapeutic foster boarding homes will remain open. As a benefit to high school and college students in care, foster children are encouraged to obtain their postsecondary goals through the assistance of their educational specialist. This position will continue to assist foster children. The educational specialist is responsible for arranging activities to explore career objectives; arranging participation in prep courses, computer classes and tutoring; assist with the college preparation process including filling out college applications; coordinating financial aid packages including researching funds availability; arranging college tours; follow-up with guidance counselors regarding grades, assessments and college placements and serve as a student advocate and transport students to and from college
Research Questions

The instrument utilized in this qualitative research was an in-depth questionnaire. The same interview questionnaire was utilized for both the individual interviews and the focus group interview. With this questionnaire the researcher sought to answer the following three research questions: Was the lack or presence of transitional planning opportunities a help or hindrance in their experiences? What is the perception of foster care children regarding graduating from high school? What are the significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goals?

The investigator conducted 13 individual interviews and one focus group interview. The purpose of conducting both the individual interviews and focus group interview were to establish triangulation and to obtain validity within the study. The individual interviews proved to provide great insight to the study. The individual interviews were heartfelt and heart retching dialogues. Participants relived their telling stories and shared the reasons they entered foster care. This element was absent from the foster group interview. The participants of the individual interviews continue to be traumatized by the events that led to their being removed from their biological parents. Notably, they were in foster care longer than the focus group counterpart and with the exception of two foster children they were in foster homes of no blood relations.

Several of the foster children had been hospitalized due to mental health reasons. Foster children experiencing emotional troubles accounts for a 67.7% rating. Emotional troubles ranked way ahead of all the other areas that impacts a foster child from graduating from high school. This area of hindrance surpassed the other areas by far regardless of the factors presented by either the individual interviews or focus group
interview. Therefore, it is a factor that must be addressed as a priority when considering strategies to ensuring that foster children succeed.

One participant arrived to the interview several months pregnant. Consequently, she will have to take a leave from college. Another participant had two small children at home. Two foster children entered foster care as a direct result of their mothers’ dying. Several of the foster children expressed being removed from their homes because their parents were either substance abusers or drug dealers. While several of the female foster children discussed being molested, one foster child described being raped by family members and lost a sister as a result of being killed by her brother.

While the themes from the individual interviews overlapped with that of the focus group interview, the researcher discovered some differences. Under both circumstances the interviewees were clear, open and honest. The perceptions of foster children’s foster care and high school experiences were clearly stated. With the individual interviews’ the foster children’s described painful entry into foster care, this accounts for their emotional instability.

Transitional services played a major role in assisting foster children graduate from high school. This was evident during the individual interviews and it was demonstrated by the quotes during the focus group interview. While it was ranked 3 through the focus group discussions, it made it to the top 10 rankings of the participants who were interviewed individually. Many of the foster children interviewed confirmed receiving transitional services.

**Individual in-depth interviews.** The researcher interviewed 13 foster children in an in-depth individual interview. They are identified by one- to two-digit numbers. They
are Participants 2 through 14. Of the 13 participants interviewed, 8 were Black and 5 were Hispanic. There were 12 females and 1 male. The average age was between 17 and 21 years old; one was 17 years old, three were 18 years old, six were 19 years old, two were 20 years old and one was 21 years old. The average high school grade-point average was 80%. The average years in placement were seven and the average changes in foster homes were three. The responses to the research questions through individual interview discussions were as follows:

**Question 1.** Was the lack or presence of transitional planning opportunities a help or hindrance in their experiences? Participant 2 stated:

Yes, Ms. [name], she was the one that like really said that if I finished high school that I could accomplish what I wanted to accomplish because once you have your high school diploma you’re able to move on, you’re able to go to college, you’re able to go to the Army if you want. That was my first intentions actually, to attend the Army but then like I got kind of scared so she was like well you should go to college and she would really help me, she would text me or call me and tell me oh I have like we could go fill out the college application and she was a major help.

Participant 4 said:

My career interest is computer graphics, graphic designing and mostly I do work on the computer or draw or anything like that, and I feel like I’m a very creative person. I do like enjoy working with my hands and everything and I think that my strength will help me be successful in life. . . . I had this program called graphic, I forgot what it was called, it’s like a comic book class and graphic novel
club actually, and that club helped you draw and you write and, you know, when I realized that I can do both of those things that’s what I wanted to do in the future to be something like a graphic designer and stuff like that.

Participant 6 stated:

I took like I said ROTC program, football is not a course but I played football, and I did a lot of weight lifting, you know, like little weight lifting competitions in school. I was very big on the weight lifting.

Participant 9 stated:

the workshop that we did. I think we went on a college tour to Tennessee, it was like 18 hours away, but it was a lifelong experience because we got to see a lot of stuff that’s not every day in New York City. It was like Tennessee, Alabama, Virginia, we went a lot of places but it was mainly for college, it was college tours so we got to speak to people there, you know, eat lunch at the dorms and stuff.

Participant 10 stated:

Counseling helped. I’m in therapeutic so counseling did help some. But now to me it’s not working the same way as like you know how you outgrow something. Like I outgrew my therapist and he’s helping me now, I mean it’s just great to talk about it, but I don’t think, it feels different now, but that counseling would be one of those things that really helped.

*Question 2*. What is the perception of foster care children regarding graduating from high school? Participant 9 stated,

When I first entered foster care I lived with, I can’t say her name, but I lived with this lady for seven years, no six years, and I’ve been away from her for two years.
I haven’t spoken to her so I’m like from the two years that I’ve been away from her I’ve been jumping from home cause it’s not consistent, but so far she taught me a lot and the reason why I left was stupid, but you know, my journey kind of made me want to finish high school and make something of myself so I don’t have to feel how I feel ever again, cause you know, I don’t really have people there to support me besides the agency and the foster parents that I do run into.

Participant 7 stated,

I entered in the hospital and I had to go on medication which helped for bit and well actually it did help for a while now, and basically I just, I think what happened is that after a while because when I was younger I was just like I kept on moving until I started to learn okay I need to talk about it, but overall I was still the type of person that was just like I need to get through it, that’s it. But if I’m not handling the situation then it doesn’t go away so I think over the years. I’ve started to break down little by little, like because you know, my mom passed away, my father passed away, my sister-in-law passed away, you know, so many people were dying and you know, my sister died a tragic death because my brother killed her. So it was things like that that was really hard and I think after a while despite even just the deaths I was going through things personally just as a teenager things like that, and I wasn’t no longer naive to the world so it starts to hit you, like oh my God, this is reality and I began to like lose myself. Like I felt it in me that I was like, and it made me hate myself, I think that was the worst thing was that I would beat myself up so bad because I’m like . . . you’re better than this, you know, you’re supposed to do better than this and if I wasn’t doing
that then oh I was this awful person, and then that’s what made me, I think I was my worst enemy because I started to break myself down, because I was like, you know, you told yourself you wasn’t going to do this but look at you’re cutting and you’re going through this like abusive relationship with a guy, you know, and things like that, and it was really tough, but I got through it.

Yet, Participant 6 stated the following,

My journey is very long. I’ve been through a lot as a young child and met a lot of different social workers, foster parents, . . . a lot of different people, kind of changed me, you know. [They] wanted me to do better ’cause I didn’t want to grow up. I don’t even know, I just, how could I put it? . . . I just changed for some reason. I don’t know why I changed, I just saw a light, something hit me. Just seeing other people just leave my life every day, every day, I just wanted to better myself and do something with myself. So, one of my goals [is] actually to be a social worker or something like that, so I can help children.

Participant 11 stated,

Definitely, I had this big thing on withdrawing. I mean I still do that in some cases, but not to the point ’cause it would be to the point that I would literally like isolate myself from people. I went through cutting as well, when I was 16 I ended up in the hospital because it got so bad. So things like that definitely would have prevented me, you know, cause God forbid, if let’s say I didn’t make it through, then I wouldn’t be here, I wouldn’t be able to help those children. So that’s what I mean, like I go through those moments when I give up on myself because then I
only see black and white, so then it’s like I forget what it is that I feel like my purpose is in life.

These are just a few of the stories. What each of these foster children have in common is having that “aha moment.” They all discovered themselves, despite the fact that they were at very low points in their lives. They found their purpose and became self-motivated. They fought to have a better life and through these efforts they all triumphant over adversity. They graduated from high school and began their journey to graduate from college.

Table 4.1 reflects the rankings of the individual interviews. Similarly, Table 4.2 indicates that frequencies of the themes among the focus group interview also included the need for foster children to be encouraged and pushed. In comparing these two rankings, there are similarities within the top 10 factors that affects a foster child’s’ ability to graduate from high school. Ironically, both groupings ranked encouragement/“pushing” as Number 2. For the individual interviews, having emotional troubles was ranked Number 1, whereas, amidst the focus group interview, having a lack of interest in school/classes was ranked Number 1. However, these number one rankings were also ranked in the top 10 for the opposite grouping. Transitional service was ranked Number 3 for the focus group and Number 10 for the individual participants. Having a sense of purpose/awareness of dreams, while it was ranked Number 4 among individual participants, it was ranked Number 19 for the focus group. Other areas listed as factors for both groupings includes, unsupportive high school, focus, truancy, and difficulty with subject matter. In both situations, the discouragement from loved ones was ranked Number 14. Based upon these discussions, the family life that most would consider
disruptive had a very telling effect on the emotional state of these foster children. The fact that they were able to graduate from high school is short of a miracle. It speaks to the determination and the will of these foster children to prevail.

Table 4.1

*Themes from Individual Interviews Ranked by Percentage of Respondents Who Mentioned Them*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Emotional Troubles</td>
<td>67.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Encouragement/”pushing”</td>
<td>33.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unsupportive H. S.</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Sense of purpose/awareness of dreams</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lack of interest in school/ classes/ studies</td>
<td>16.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Unsupportive Foster Parents</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Agency services</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Somebody to talk to/emotional support/love</td>
<td>13.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Jumping from H.S. to H.S. or placement to placement</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Transitional Services</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Self-Awareness/ “Aha” moment</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Discouragement from love ones</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Being alone/away from family</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Perceived negative consequences</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Difficulty with subject matter/ amount of homework</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ability to move on from past mistakes/problems-keep a positive attitude</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>College planning</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.2

Themes From Focus Group Ranked by Percentage of Respondents Who Mentioned Them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Lack of interest in school/classes/studies</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Encouragement/“pushing”</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Transitional Services*</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Unsupportive H.S./agency/staff/atmosphere*</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Friends/dating of unhealthy influence/as a distraction</td>
<td>17.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Recognition of strengths and/or their utility</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Emotional Troubles</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Disrespecting others</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Difficulty with subject matter/amount of homework</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Lack of positive experiences</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Participation in unrequired activities to explore interests/for pleasure*</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Discouragement of loved ones</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Lack of encouragement</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Group home living</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Vocational enthusiasm*</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities*</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sense of Purpose/awareness of dreams*</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Requirement to keep grades up to participate in extracurricular activities*</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Themes perceived as significant in achieving goal of graduation.

**Question 3.** What are the significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goals? Participant 13 described her circumstances in which she had an epiphany in the 11th grade after failing her classes. She then had to take 10 classes during her last year, three classes during the summer, pass two English classes during credit recovery and she needed three Spanish classes to graduate. She was able to accomplish this feat through the assistance of her principal, guidance counselor and a teacher. Participant 13 states,

So I was put in a foster home that the woman only knew Spanish and I really didn’t know a lot of Spanish, I knew some but not a lot and he said that he wasn’t supposed to put me in Spanish V but he did anyways because I found somebody
like that I would learn Spanish, you know, because they said if you pass the regents with an 85 or higher they give you those credits, like those Spanish credits, they give you all the whole six credits and I needed more elective credits. So that’s what I did. I ended up learning, like they really help you out ’cause they knew I was in foster care. And they were just saying that it’s good that I’m trying, because a lot of people can’t even deal with it that’s in foster care, ’cause they won’t do so much.

Participant 10 stated,

In my final year like actually before I was put into foster care I wanted to join the track team, I’m a runner, I’ve always been a runner, I’m pretty fast even though I’m not as fast as most of the ones on the track team, but naturally I’m fast. So I used to run with the track team and I also gym class, I didn’t used to go to gym, it used to be the number one class I never went to, so in order for me to pass some of those classes the track coach he allowed me to run with the track team.

Participant 7 stated,

I came into foster care when I was 8. And that happened because my father . . . violated one of my sisters, so that forced us to go into foster care. And I’ve been through some different house[s], maybe like four houses, because there were issues there where I’ve had like fights or felt, you know, discomfort and stuff like that. Actually, what contributed to it, though, of me being able to succeed, is that . . . I feel like I always had the inner strength, that I’ve always been like, “Okay this in not what I want.” ’Cause I’ve seen how my father was with my mom, and how all the women in my family have either been raped or molested,
which I’m one of them too. But you know, I already told myself since I was young that I was going to make a difference. That I needed to in order to show that not my whole family was going to go downhill, you know, that there was going to be a few successful people there. Also my sisters contributed, you know, I have two older sisters that are in my life and they helped a lot along the way as well.

Participant 8 stated,

One way was through therapy. I started seeing Dr. Soprano through the house and he helped me, he was not against me type and that helped me out. Second way was through my kid’s father, he got me to see that there’s more than one way to get what you want, that your way might not be the best, there’s other ways or people might have other ideas that could help you get to what you want faster or easier or less expensive I guess you could say. So that’s another way. The third was my kids, I can be awesome, the world’s against me, I hate everybody and have them seeing that and they start acting like that and bugging out and so it was more of a collective of the three that got me to settle down and rethink that my lifestyle is not where it should be and I changed that.

Participant 10 stated,

I got into foster care and then the threat of being left back really what spurred me to do the last year, if I go to, if I were to stay in the New York City Public Schools I would have been held back a year, I would have been in 11th grade, but being in Yonkers I could be in my own grade and I could graduate on time, it’s just I would have to work a little harder.
Participant 6 stated,

I realized that, you know, it’s time to crank down, I’m in and out of foster care, I was 20 years old, I’m 20 years old now, but at the time I was about 19, yeah 18 or 19, I just realized, you know, I’m not a kid and I don’t really have a mother and father, my mother is passed. . . . But I just realized, you know, I just needed to do something with myself and it was really no way it was going to do a full year if I didn’t take these steps to go to college or anything.

There are many significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goal to graduate from high school. Self-efficacy, dealing with emotional problems and taking advantage of support were the contributing factors that aided in the success of each of these children. Ironically, not one of these foster children went unscathed. They have the scars of living a chaotic life.

In each scenario, the participants found their inner strength, whether it was an epiphany or a desire to focus and succeed. For each foster child, their journey led them to a decision to graduate from high school.

**Focus group interview.** Four foster children were interviewed during the focus group interview. They are identified by three digit numbers. They are Participants 101, 102, 103 and 104. Participants 102 and 104 were 18 years old. Participant 101 was 19 years old and Participant was 20 years old. Participant 102 was the only male and the only Hispanic in the group. There other participants were Black. Participant 103 had been in placement for 15 years. She entered foster care when she was 5 years old. Although she had been in four placements, her current placement was in a kinship foster home. The remaining three participants were in care for four years and under and two of
them had only one placement. The high school grade point average among the focus group members was 73%. Participant 101 was on leave from college, however, she expects to return during the fall 2011. The remaining three focus group members were in good standing at their perspective colleges.

Through the focus group interview, the researcher received rich data and pertinent information that is helpful in providing a better understanding of the role that transitional services played on foster children graduating from high school. In addition, the focus group interview provided their perceptions regarding their foster care and high school experiences. In their own words foster children answer the research questions. The focus group members were open and honest regarding their personal experience. What each of them revealed was the fact that they had to overcome some academic difficulties. However, they were able to describe whether transitional services helped them to reach their academic goal to graduate from high school. Highlights regarding the results of the focus group are emphasized by quotes taken directly from the focus group transcripts.

The responses to the research questions through a focus group discussion are what follows;

**Question 1.** Was the lack or presence of transitional planning opportunities a help or hindrance in their experiences? This question was addressed through a data analysis that revealed two major themes. The themes help and difficulties represented whether the participants responses indicated factors that helped them or hindered them in achieving their goal to graduate. The categories of help and difficulties were further divided into factors that were intrinsic and extrinsic, meaning that intrinsic helping or hindering factors were under their own control, while extrinsic factors were outside of their control.
Furthermore, as a result of this process, whether transitional planning opportunities were a help or hindrance was revealed.

Participant 103 stated,

My motivation of actually pursuing my career one day and knowing that I have to finish this in order to get there, that’s what motivated me and helped me to keep going. . . . The extracurricular activities I was doing, like acting and performing, looking forward to that every day. Instead of being outside on the street, you know, with everybody, I was inside like doing something constructive.

In the case of Participant 103, she wanted to become a singer or actress so the extracurricular activities she was involved in was to that end. According to Participant 103, she knew from an early age that she wanted to be a singer, therefore, many of the activities that she participated in centered on entertainment. She looked forward to graduating to pursue her dream. Therefore, as indicated above the activities were a coordinated set of activities and/or transitional services which lead to this foster child meeting her postsecondary goal. She discussed various activities she participated in to reach her goal of becoming a singer. Her persona during the interview also was one of an entertainer. She was radiant, beautiful, showy and very made up. In addition, she carried herself as if she was a singer that should be discovered.

Participant 104 stated, “My dream was always to be a nurse. . . . I took advantage of completing an internship.” She further stated, “In high school I did the internship at the Jewish Home Hospital. . . . Mine was being in the hospital all the time and when I became a certified nurse assistant, I could do what everything a nurse could do . . . I was happy.” She raved about her nursing home experience and how it helped her to stop
using drugs as a form of rebelling against her biological parents and she wanted to prove them wrong regarding her not being able to graduate from high school. Participant 104’s experience at the nursing home proved to be invaluable. At the time of the focus group, she was enrolled in college pursuing a degree in nursing.

The members of the focus group described taking advantage of a formula that works, namely transitional services. Their testimony attested to the type of activities and services they required to graduate from high school. Therefore, a planned set of activities was necessary.

The quotes of the focus group were placed into themes and placed in rank order based on frequencies with no regard to being intrinsic or extrinsic and/or a help or hindrance. Refer to Table 4.2. Focus group participants ranked transitional services as being the Number 3 reason for their graduating from high school. During the focus group discussion, transitional services were mentioned 13 times, giving it a 22% frequency rate. Transitional services fell within the services category. Refer to Appendix E Intrinsic/Extrinsic Data Frequencies.

Throughout the focus group interview, participants described receiving transitional services in various forms. They either participated in planned activities designed to assist them with meeting their postsecondary goals, as well as, sports, activities related to areas of interest or hobbies and received services included counseling or tutoring. Since each of them had to overcome various obstacles to obtain their high school diplomas, they needed the support, services and a set of planned activities. Participant 101 stated, “The internships I did because it guided me towards whatever
career path that I was to choose and me going to graduate from the high school I did, it was a good thing for me, it helped me focus on my work.”

The need for transitional services has been established in a foster child’s ability to graduate from high school. Focus group members ranked transitional services as number three. In addition, transitional services are included in the themes that are indicated by the asterisk on table 4.2. This includes the themes related to vocational enthusiasm, extracurricular activities, exploration of interest and sense of purpose/awareness of dreams. Subsequently, the researcher sought to explore the perception regarding what foster children felt was instrumental in increasing in helping them graduate from high school.

**Question 2.** What is the perception of foster care children regarding graduating from high school? During the focus group discussion, participants took full responsibility for their educational journey. They clearly stated that the number one reason from their perspective that stood in the way of them graduating from high school was their lack of interest in school/classes/studies. This lack of interest in school had a rating of 37.5%. They understood that if school became a priority then they could meet the graduation requirement and thereafter they could navigate their own destiny beyond aging out of foster care. Moreover, they expressed that graduating from high school was a major step in their leading normal lives. Some of them had to spend time addressing their mental health issues, develop self-efficacy skills and take advantage of services and supports that were available. For some, this was a difficult journey. This journey begins with the foster care experience. Participants had to overcome many obstacles and fight
against the odds to graduate from high school. They moved from one foster home to another, they attended several high schools and their futures were uncertain.

During the focus group discussion the foster care participants described identifying with their parents and wanting to reside with them despite any form of neglect or abuse. They described lacking positive experiences, being discouraged by loved ones and having unhealthy relationships. Foster care children purports that the foster care system is not the safe haven it claims to be. As a result, foster care children are left to their own devices to succeed. They had to develop the self-efficacy skills to excel. They learned that the key to their success dwelled within them. One participant states,

My change in study with school and when I moved from Brooklyn to Staten Island since I didn’t know anybody out there that was a good thing for me cause when I went into that new school I said to myself I’m not going to try to make any friends cause I don’t need any more distractions and I was just going to focus and that helped me out a lot. . . . Me having to get about 15 credits within two months. I had to take all these extra classes and do all this extra stuff and I was not going to do another year in high school, so I did whatever I could in order to graduate, even if it meant I had to work through Saturdays, basically I was doing school work seven days a week.

They learned to advocate for themselves, as it was the intrinsic motivations that would ultimately assist them to prevail. Another participant stated,

They didn’t help me in high school. They didn’t, nobody did . . . [the foster care agency is] helping me now pay for school, but when I was in high school nobody
helped. . . . I mean I didn’t have no services like as I told you I did everything myself so I didn’t need no help.

Participants described being hospitalized for depression and emotional issues stemming from their foster care experience. They also described being truant from school. In some cases, the participant missed extensive time away from school and considered dropping out of school. These factors sought to rob the foster children of their ability to graduate from high school. Yet it is their inner strength, their will to prevail despite their circumstances that helps them to forge ahead. In their own words, participants give their account for what it took to graduate from high school.

Participant 101 stated,

Around the time I went to my second high school I was going through a lot with depression and I found myself writing a lot of poetry and I realized that I was good with that, I’m a good English student and it wasn’t until then that I realized that.

Participant 102 stated,

I’m not really sure like cause I was raised in a group home for the first two years of high school too so I really didn’t know what to think I just wanted to get out of high school and move on with my college life and basically fulfill what my dad said before he died was just finish school, and I did. So that was basically it.

Participant 103 stated,

I’ve been in foster care since I was 5 . . . going through high school during the time I was living with my cousins so it was like somewhat of a kinship care . . . I wouldn’t say that I’m like the smartest person like alive, but my motivation was
like just being in the performing arts and that would motivate me to keep going because if I didn’t pass my classes then I wasn’t able to continue doing what I was doing. So I guess just having self-motivation cause it will help me go through high school.

Foster children oftentimes had to repair their self-esteem following years of ridicule that they receive from their parents. It is difficult to be successful in the wake of being put down. Participant 104 stated, “my family always was so bad . . . like you can’t finish high school.”

Ironically, receiving encouragement/“pushing” was the second highest theme identified through the focus group quotations. This theme falls under the emotional stability category and was ranked Number 2 based on 14 quotes at 23.7%. Encouragement/”pushing” is an extrinsic source of help.

Foster care students clearly stated that they need encouragement. They need stakeholders to push them to meet the graduation requirement. However, as indicated with Participant 104 her family members constantly told her that she would not graduate from high school. While she engaged in some self-destructive behaviors, ultimately she was able to get back on track through encouragement from a teacher, participating in a nursing problem where she earned her CNA certificate before graduating from high school.

**Question 3.** What are the significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goals? Unfortunately, children in foster care have many circumstances that affected their capacity to meet the high school graduation requirement. However, once these foster children made a decision to graduate, they did whatever it took to accomplish
their goal. Oftentimes, they surprised themselves by their efforts but others as well. They shared how they changed their friends, stopped using drugs, stop cutting classes, passed their classes and had to pass State examinations. In addition, they had to go to night school, day school and summer school to make up classes.

Participant 102 stated;

How I got through high school was kind of a miracle to me. . . . The first two years like I didn’t go to school at all, I missed constantly. . . . So when I started in 11th grade I had 7 credits, I don’t know how I got 7 credits but I did, and for those last two years 11th grade and 12th grade I just went to a lot of Saturday schools after school and just did all my stuff I had to do and then I graduated from the same school.

Moreover, Participant 104 had to overcome some academic difficulties. She received tutoring to assist her pass her classes. She described having to retake the U.S. History Regents several times, she explains, “when I finally passed my U.S. history I was really, really happy . . . so when I got that I stopped crying and stuff.”

Participant 103 stated,

I remember I didn’t like doing homework especially when I got to math classes I didn’t know like what to do, like I just didn’t get it and but you know I had extra help in high school. . . . Yeah, I could have used a tutor, actually I didn’t have a tutor but I had like a teacher, like a resource teacher to go to.

Participant 101 responded,

I went to three different high schools in order to graduate. I started off at P.O. High School, and I went there up until the beginning of 11th grade. And I ended
up transferring to another alternative high school called C.D. and I was there for about a year, and that didn’t work for me either. So then I moved to Staten Island and I went to high school out there, and that was like a good opportunity for me. For some reason, I don’t know if the work was easier, but I was more focused there. I was able to get really high grades, like 80s and 90s, and I had to take regular classes, I had to take p.m. [evening] school, I had to do extra credit, Saturday school, in order to graduate on top. And I did it, and then I graduated.

Participants described making a goal commitment to graduate from high school by being focused and self-activated. Being focused was very significant among the Focus Group members. Being focus falls in the self-efficacy category and was ranked number four by the focus group with 14 quotes at 20.9%. Staying focused is an intrinsic source of help. Refer to Appendix E.

There are many more extrinsic sources of struggle than intrinsic sources of struggle. Based on this finding, the researcher noted that there are more things that are beyond a foster child’s control that negatively impact their ability to meet the high school graduation requirement. The findings demonstrate that there are a lot more extrinsic struggles than intrinsic struggles, refer to Intrinsic/Extrinsic Data Frequencies in Appendix E.

The researcher discussed the individual interviews and focus group interview results independently. A comparison of the two types of interviews follows. The biggest contrast between the individual interviews and focus group falls within the theme having emotional troubles. For the participants interviewed individually, emotional troubles had a 67.7% rating compared to a 12.5% rating received by participants of the focus group.
Emotional troubles was ranked number one among individual participants, whereas, it was ranked number eight by the focus group participants. In Table G.9 there were 21 responses which have a 67.7% value, which indicates that Emotional Troubles affected participants’ ability to meet the high school graduation requirement. The ranking of the categories were based on the frequencies and/or number of responses that was received from participants regarding each theme. Appendix E contains tables of frequencies relevant to each category.

The researcher attributes this aspect on the fact that the foster children interviewed on a one-to-one basis were better able to divulge their personal experiences in greater detail due to the confidentiality of their interview. As a result, the focus of those interviewed individually addressed the mental health issues stemming from being raised in dysfunctional families and resulting in foster care placements. Therefore, the focus of participants who were interviewed individually was more on their emotional difficulties rather than engaging in a set of coordinated activities. Nevertheless, the combined ratings ranked it as the number one factors affecting foster care children’s ability to graduate.

On the other hand, the focus group participants ranked lack of interest in school/classes/studies as number one. This theme received a 37.5% rating compared with a ranking of number five by the participants interviewed individually. In this case, the theme received a 16.1% rating.

Amongst the top 10 factors that affected children in foster care’s ability to meet the high school graduation requirement and consistent within both the individual interviews and focus group interview are; dealing with emotional troubles, the need for
encouragement/“pushing,” experiencing unsupportive high schools, having a lack of interest in school/classes/studies, and the utilization of transitional services. Of these 10 factors, five themes were the same for both interview groupings, which yields a 50% rate. Moreover, of the top five factors that affected children in foster care’s ability to meet the high school graduation requirement and consistent within both the individual interviews and focus group interview are; having a lack of interest in school/classes/studies, the need for encouragement/“pushing” and experiencing unsupportive H.S./agency/atmosphere. Of these five factors, three themes were the same for both interview grouping, which yields a 60% rate.

Conversely, sense of purpose/awareness of dreams was ranked number four among participants interviewed individually and was ranked number 19 by the focus group participants. Both groups ranked the need for encouragement/“pushing” number two. Also, transitional services was ranked number three for by the focus group participants and it was ranked number 10 for by the participants interviewed individually. Overall, it was ranked number five in area of importance regarding children in foster care’s ability to meet the high school graduation requirement. Regarding the data retrieved from the quotations, transitional services were prevalent to both interview groupings. This demonstrates that transitional service is a significant factor among both study groups. Refer to Table 4.3 for these comparisons.
Table 4.3

**Key Findings: Responses of Individual Interviews and Focus Group Compared**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Individual</th>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Emotional Troubles</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>80.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Encouragement / “pushing”</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>56.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Lack of interest</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>53.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Unsupportive H.S.</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Transitional Services*</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Focus</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Sense of Purpose/awareness of dreams*</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Truancy</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Discouragement from loved ones</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Difficult with subject matter / amount</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of homework</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Themes perceived as significant in achieving goal of graduation.

When participants of both the individual and the focus group participants were asked the question, If you had to pick two essential resources in that perfect high school to assist foster children to do well, can you tell me what they would be and describe why it is important to a child? They indicated the resources that the participating foster care children found essential which is ranked in order of preference.
Table 4.4 displays a listing of essential resources which are in ranked order. Not surprising the essential resources indicated in table 4.4 is similar to the themes in table 4.3. In both tables, encouragement, support, emotional and activities are consistent with both tables. College planning, guidance counselor, music and student newspaper were introduced in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4

*Essential Resources for Foster Care Children Ranked by Preference*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Essential resource</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Academic support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>College planning, preparation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Emotional/Therapeutic support and/or programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Extracurricular activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Goal-setting and goal-attainment programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Guidance counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mentor for motivation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Music programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Student newspaper to provide teen-relevant information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Supportive teachers and staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis and Findings

The researcher asked participants 31 interview questions which assisted in revealing the findings of the study. The findings in this study are the areas that received the biggest responses to the interview questions. This is supported through frequency charts. The results of the findings are divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. There are three major categories that determined whether a foster child will graduate from high school. These three indicators are: self-efficacy, emotional stability and services. These indicators were significant to both the focus groups and individual interviews. These factors affected both the focus group and individual’s ability to graduate from high school.

The self-efficacy category includes, a sense of purpose/awareness of dreams, staying focused, self-awareness, recognition of strengths and being self-motivated. Foster children expressed a need to have a sense of direction. They overwhelming needed to set goals and work towards them. While it was challenging for them to meet the graduation requirement, they had to rely on their inner strengths by being focused, self-motivated and having self-awareness. This was all accomplished by the recognition of their strengths.

The emotional category includes, maintaining emotional stability, having someone to talk to/emotional support/ love, receiving encouragement/“pushing”, unsupportive foster parents, jumping from high school to high school, discouragement from loved ones, being alone/away from family, dealing with perceived negative consequences, ability to move on from past mistakes and an unsupportive high school and foster care agency. This study revealed that children in foster care’s abilities to
graduate from high school are hampered by many circumstances that are beyond their control. The fact that they enter foster care to begin with has nothing to do with anything that they did wrong. Parents fail them, foster parents fail them, schools fail them and foster care agencies fail them. Consequently, these factors have a tremendous impact on foster children’s emotional stability. As a result, they are faced with mental health issues. Many of the foster children described being hospitalized for psychiatric conditions. Despite their circumstances, they discussed a determination to heal and develop a positive attitude. Yet, they describe that oftentimes their road to recovery requires having someone to talk to, getting emotional support and being loved. Simultaneously, they require encouragement/"pushing."

The services category includes transitional services, vocational enthusiasm, agency services/programs/contacts, college planning and participation in activities to explore interest for pleasure. Through the focus and individual interviews, foster children described receiving a lot of services in order to assist them in meeting the graduation services. They received counseling, participated in sports, internships, extracurricular activities, tutoring, college trips, career explorations, community activities and independent living training to name a few.

These foster children were determined to graduate from high school and to go on to college despite the many obstacles that threatened to impede their success. Whether it was to overcome the challenges that their parents encountered, prove their parents wrong or to fulfill they promise to a dying parent, they became self-motivated. Through in-depth interviews and data analysis, the researcher discovered that self-efficacy was the major reason for foster children graduating from high school. Yet, they needed to
address their emotional problems before they were able to state advantages of all the
services that were being offered.

The research question that drove this study centered around, *was the lack or
presence of transitional planning opportunities a help or hindrance in their experiences?*
In their own words, foster children attending college described the many transitional
services that they took advantage of to assist them in meeting the high school graduation
requirement. While their journey was a tumultuous one and no two stories were the
same, transitional services played a major role in assisting foster children reach their high
school graduation milestone.

**Summary of Results**

Foster children demonstrated that transition services were a major factor in their
graduating from high school. There were many examples of how transitional services
helped participants meet the graduation requirement. This qualitative study sought to
determine whether there was a connection between transitional services and meeting the
high school graduation requirement. Moreover, the study sought to obtain a broader
insight regarding foster children’s foster care experience and high school experience. It
was the researcher’s intention to gain a better understanding of what helped and hindered
foster children from graduating from high school to assist future foster children in
meeting the high school graduation requirement. In addition, the researcher’s objective
was to provide foster care agencies with a comprehensive understanding of those factors
that will increase the likelihood of foster children graduating from high school.

Through a thorough investigation of 13 individual interviews and a focus group,
the researcher received rich textural data in which 10 major themes emerged including
intrinsic and extrinsic responses to what helped and hindered the participants from graduating from high school. These responses substantiated the coordinated planned activities that were utilized to foster children meeting their postsecondary goals. Foster children expressed being involved in internships, extracurricular activities, tutoring, counseling and career exploration courses.

The researcher was able to establish triangulation by using two different methods of cross analysis, which included individual interviews and a focus group interview. Through a descriptive analysis and cross analysis the responses lead to the same result. The area of transitional services received a lot of emphasis during the individual and focus group interviews. Transitional services ranked number five in the key findings affecting a student’s ability to graduate. As a result, receiving transitional services is significant to foster children meeting the graduation rate. In addition, transition services were also integrated into other factors which affect foster children’s ability to graduate from high school. These factors includes, sense of purpose/“Aha” moment, agency services, college planning, recognition of strengths, vocational enthusiasm, extracurricular activities and participation in unrequired activities.

In Chapter 1, transitional services were defined as being activities driven by goal-oriented planning. Transitional goal setting must concentrate on a student’s career objective, interest and strengths. The transition services designation has four fundamental elements: (a) assessing abilities, (b) future planning, (c) coordinated activities, and (d) setting postsecondary goals (Flexer et al., 2008). By this definition, realizing ones’ dreams is accomplished through a set of coordinated activities which are known as transitional services. Another example includes recognition of strengths and
their utility; assessing student strengths, needs, interests, and preferences is a fundamental element of providing transitional services. Vocational Enthusiasm, this is a concentration of a student’s career objective. Agency Services/programs/contact are a coordinated set of activities and participation in activities to explore interest/for pleasure is a way of assessing student strengths, needs, interests, and preferences which are components of transitional services.

Some participants described receiving a lot of support while others stated they had to advocate for themselves. While no two stories were the same, many of their stories lead to the same results. They all encountered tremendous obstacles and many paid the price emotionally for their efforts. Yet each one of these foster children went on to college despite the probability of them being a youth at risk.

While each of these participants articulated their desire to reach their postsecondary goals, they nevertheless have a history of overcoming challenges. In some instances, they continued to face major dilemmas at the time of the interviews. One participant stated, “I want to be able to do for my young ones, my little kids, my kids, I have two kids. I want to do for mine and give them the life that I had when I was with my family and not put them through the system or anything.” Another participant stated, “It took me a while but, . . . when I got to my second high school I started saying I’d be more aware of what I was strong at. I was going through a lot with depression, and I found myself writing a lot of poetry. And I realized that I was good with that, I’m a good English student, and it wasn’t until then that I realized that.”

Along these lines, another participant stated, “I was my biggest enemy, I’d say to always believe that you can make it because even despite that you’ve been through a lot,
even when like for instance even when I was cutting, even though I was resulting to that, the point was that I was still there, you know, that I was still making it and I was still fighting even if I made bad decisions.” Finally another participant stated. “They would push me to like pass, I mean classes were hard ’cause I wouldn’t say that I’m like the smartest person like alive.

The themes that emerged were grouped into three major categories linked to foster children graduating from high school. The three categories are, self-efficacy, emotional stability and services. These categories define the significant factors that impacts foster care children’s ability to obtain a high school diploma. Yet, the area of emotional troubles received the greatest combined response and the highest response from the participants interviewed individually. The overwhelming response to this category must be addressed in order that foster children can be successful. Unfortunately, at the time of the interviews, several of the foster children described having to work on their mental health issues. One participant states,

When I entered foster care I actually entered straight from, how would we say it, . . . I’m not too sure if that would be considered a mental institution, . . . counseling helped. I’m in therapeutic so counseling did help some. But now to me it’s not working the same way as like you know how you outgrow something. Like I outgrew my therapist and he’s helping me now, I mean it’s just great to talk about it, but I don’t think, it feels different now, but that counseling would be one of those things that really helped.

This authenticates why members of the focus group would rank having a lack of interest in school as the Number 1 factor impacting their ability to graduate from high
school. Along these lines, participants interviewed individually ranked this area as number five. They demonstrated this lack of interest by being truant from school, which was another major theme.

Despite the dysfunctional family circumstances that these foster children had to endure, they were caring, considerate, loving and conscientious. They expressed genuine concern and compassion for others. Many of the research participant’s career objectives are to be service providers with an emphasis on helping others. They are in pursuit of careers including nursing, social work, teaching, firefighting, police officer, detective, speech pathology, criminal justice and communication disorders to name a few. They want to ensure the safety and welfare of mankind. They know better than most the importance of this. Subsequently, they want to break the vicious cycle. This goal begins with getting a high school diploma.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

This study examined effects of transitional services for children in foster care and the extent to which it contributed to their graduating from high school. Moreover, the study explored foster children’s ability to graduate from high school despite the odds, and successfully transition into college. Specifically, this research considered the following research questions: Was there a lack or presence of transitional planning opportunities that served as a help or hindrance in their experiences? What is the perception of foster care children regarding graduating from high school? What are the significant factors that helped foster care children achieve their goals? Based on findings from this research, the access to transitional services was significant in the lives of foster children. In addition, other significant factors in the lives of foster children include their emotional stability, their lack of interest in school, being encouraged/“pushed” and having a supportive high school.

This would be consistent with the Casey study (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2008), which provided a nurturing foster family, a supportive agency, and comprehensive services to help eradicate the effects of earlier abuse and neglect. This research builds on the Casey Alumni Study in that the chief purpose of the study was to ascertain what factors are associated with increasing the high school graduation rate. Subsequently, the Casey Agency has historically dedicated more services to foster care than public agencies (Casey, 2003).
Based on research conducted by Geenen and Powers (2004), 36% of the children in foster care experienced homelessness, 25% of the male foster care population becomes incarcerated and only 50% graduate from high school. As indicated by Geenen and Powers’ study, foster children fail to make successful transitions into adult life. They age out of care faced with the challenges of fending or themselves without the means to become self-sufficient. Yet, in spite of the odds, 20% enroll in either a two year or four year college. Drawn from the perceptions of 17 foster children who are among this very small group, this chapter discusses recommendations for increasing the number of students in foster care who can beat the odds and grade from high school, despite their circumstances. Implications of findings are discussed in this chapter, which provides insight on those factors that contributed to these foster children’s successful high school graduation.

**Implications of Findings**

This research sets out to understand those factors that contribute to students in foster care who graduate from high school and go on to achieve their postsecondary goals in spite of documented odds against their successful transition into adult life. The transition theory is significant, as it emphasizes the relationship between school experiences and the postsecondary transition. Pecora et al. (2006) and Geenen and Powers (2004) explains that the transition model centers on participation in extracurricular activities, independent living training, and educational and/or vocational preparation. Kohler further explains the importance of providing transition services in her Taxonomy of Transition Programming. Her focal point is placed on postsecondary results of special education students (Kohler, 1996). Kohler further maintains that
transition services are a foundation from which high school programs and activities should be cultivated. Hence, there has been comprehensive research on coordinating transition services for students with special needs, however, there is far less research focusing on transitional services for foster children, which is perceived as enabling them to graduate from high school. Despite the seemingly obvious implication that this information can inspire, efforts to increase the graduation rate of foster children have been neglected. Therefore, information regarding the academic success of foster children is vital.

The implications of the research findings can assist policy makers in expanding the mandate to provide transition services to foster children 90 days prior to their aging out of the foster care system. The Fostering Connections Act established that transitional planning had to be implemented 90 days prior to foster children emancipation from foster care. Foster care agencies are required to develop these plans before a foster child ages out. However, as described by participants in this study, 90 days is inadequate to prepare foster children to transition into adult life. Therefore, the findings from this study provides policy makers with the incentive to expand the 90 day mandate to providing a transition plan that is commensurate with the transitional planning that begins at age 15 for special education students. Based on what the respondents revealed in this study, services for children in foster care are needed beyond the mandated time allocation to address their mental health issues, their lack of interest of school, their participation in planned activities and their receiving support and services. There are implications for an expansion of the foster care transition policy which is outlined by the Fostering Connections. Foster children require counseling, tutoring, internships, in addition to,
services to address their needs to assist them in meeting the graduation requirement. Equally as important, policy makers must create provisions that establish a process to assist foster children in reaching their postsecondary goals. This may require that the aging out process is extended. For example, students generally graduate from college at the age of 22 for the basic college education. For any specialization, beyond receiving an undergraduate degree, foster children require additional support and services continuing to 26 years old. The federal government has acknowledged the necessity for medical assistance to age 26. In the same light, foster children should be granted the same consideration. More specifically, if foster children opt to pursue a higher education, there would be tremendous implications relative to the national economy, namely the reduction in homelessness, incarceration, and dependency on public assistance and the decrease in the high school dropout rate of foster children. Ultimately, the funding of expanding transitional services must become a priority.

With the Casey National Alumni Study, there was a connection between foster children receiving services and their successful transition into adult life. If the graduation rate of foster children is increased, it would have an economic impact. Pecora et al.’s study demonstrated that if foster children received appropriate services and supports, their outcomes would be similar to those of their general education counterparts. At the very least, it would decrease homelessness, incarceration and the dependency of public assistance. Society would benefit from foster children graduating from high school as they would avoid a future of living in poverty (They’re All Our Children!, 2007). It is essential that transition services are provided to assist foster children shift from school into adult life with the necessary tools to assist them in leading a successful adult life.
Notably, social service agencies historically had to focus on removing abused and neglected children from their homes to ensure their safety. Consequently, little emphasis is placed on the continuing academic needs of children in foster care and their transition into adult life (Geenen & Powers, 2004).

Findings from this research provides insight into the academic experienced realized by children in foster care who have met the high school graduation requirement and successfully transition into adult living. The findings substantiate the relationship between foster children receiving transition services and their meeting the graduation requirement. Accordingly, the implications are that the expansion of transitional services for foster children will assist foster children in having a successful life and their will avoid the pitfalls of poverty, incarceration, homelessness and a dependency of public assistance. In addition, the cycle of foster children being ill-prepared to meet the demands of society will be broken which would prevent generations of children returning to care.

For the students interviewed, graduation from high school was the first step for most of them. They continued to required support and services to address those things that resonating from their foster care experience. They require further assistance in lieu of the fact that the system failed to offer them a quality education. To this end, foster children provided invaluable information regarding their educational and foster care experience. Based on their testimony attending unsupportive high schools and being placed within unsupportive foster care agencies had a tremendous impact on their ability to meet the high school graduation requirement. Ultimately, policymakers are faced with the implications of providing quality and additional services as needed in a proactive
manner or face the consequences of foster children not having the essential skills necessary to address the demands of independent living. In short, the extension of the mandate to develop a transition plan 90 day prior to emancipation will ensure that foster children meet their postsecondary goals. The criteria to implement this provision must take into account the services, support and commitment of foster children to reach their postsecondary goal.

**Limitations**

The limitation of the study centers on the fact that the perceptions of what helped or hindered foster children came from participants of one agency. As a result, the perceptions of these children in foster care may not be applicable to other foster care settings. In addition, time did not permit the researcher the opportunity to reach all the students that met the selection criteria with the foster care agency.

**Recommendations**

Through an extensive review of the data, the researcher was able to make a connection between a foster child meeting the high school graduation rate and transitional services. The participants were candid with their responses to the research questions, which provided valuable information that can be used as a catalyst for change.

**A 90-day transition plan.** For the first recommendation the researcher suggests placing emphasis on ensuring that foster children receive transitional services. The provisions of the transition services clause should be consistent among federal statutes. Specifically, the policy outlined by the Fostering Connections should be congruent with the IDEA. IDEA requires that school districts coordinate activities so that students can have smooth transition between high school and meeting their postsecondary goals.
These activities must be provided to students with disabilities age 15 years and above. To this end, the same provision should be made for foster children, whereas, the foster care agency have the responsibility of ensuring that this mandate is met. As a result, academic supportive services, and especially receiving assistance to address their mental health issues would be addressed. As Pecora et al.’s study indicates foster care agencies must replicate effective services that are connected to long-term results. Subsequently, foster care agencies must implement a holistic approach to assisting foster children, which includes addressing their mental health, making referrals, providing academic assistance, and encouraging participation in extracurricular activities. While the stipulations for this extended support and services will not be spelled out in this study, they should include counseling, tutoring, internships, postsecondary assistance, and housing.

**Expanding the aging out limit.** Second, consistent with the suggestions made in the implications of findings section, the researcher is recommending on-going support and services that should be maintained throughout and beyond foster children graduating from high school. This support should surpass the current aging out criteria of 21. As previously established, the scope of foster children’s educational, emotional and family tribulations far exceed this time limitation. Foster children have excessive impediments that put them at a disadvantage to becoming productive citizens. In order to sufficiently prepare them for their meeting the demands of the job market, it is imperative that they continue to receive on-going support until the age of 26 specifically in pursuit of reaching their postsecondary goals.
Education Specialist. Third, federal legislators must mandate that full time education specialists be on staff of all foster care agencies. Accordingly, foster care agencies must hire an educational specialist to assist foster students in meeting their postsecondary goals. The researcher is recommending that each foster care agency employ an educational specialist. The educational specialists within the agency had a tremendous impact on the research participants’ success. Unfortunately, many of the agencies that the researcher contacted did not have anyone serving in this capacity. The educational specialist began to work with each foster child while they were in high school. She helped them in all aspects of their high school experience and continuing throughout their attendance at college, the army, or training program. She assisted foster children in areas such as filling out college applications, applying for financial aid and scholarships, and visiting colleges. More important, she provided encouragement and emotional support. Kohler suggests that foster care children must be engaged in exemplary transitional practices through their foster care agencies. To this end, successful transitional planning rests with foster care agencies. The results of providing transitional programming are supported by positive postsecondary student outcomes (Kohler, 1996). These findings substantiate the incorporation of transition services.

Political Action Movement. Fourth, advocates for children in foster care or children rights organizations must pressure their politicians and policymakers to make the plight of foster children a priority. They must push the foster care children agenda to ensure that laws are enacted that will assist children in care become productive citizens by receiving comprehensive services which are congruent to other at risk populations. These advocates must build the necessary coalitions to demand quality education,
services and care for children in foster care. Additionally, advocates for children in foster care must mobilize constituents in support of this voiceless population. These coalitions must solicit support from lawmakers and appeal to their politicians to ensure that they recognize the compelling reasons to get involved with spearheading radical change in the foster care system.

Currently, seven billion dollars is being spent on the care, shelter, and education of foster children. Despite this major expenditure, foster children continue to lag behind academically, socially, and in the job market. Ultimately, the failure of the foster care system to appropriately educate foster children and meet their mental health needs will have a tremendous impact on the financial economy, society at large, and the foster population and their children that are being overlooked and underserved. This investigator calls upon policymakers and legislators to establish policies for foster children that are consistent with other at-risk populations, namely the special education population. The ramifications of creating acts and provisions that serve as an appendage to addressing foster care issues is shortsighted and detrimental to a defenseless, voiceless, and lost generation. Thus, comprehensive laws must be established that are far reaching, beneficial, cost-effective, and efficient and provide the services and support necessary to address the real issues of foster children, including but not limited to transitional services. Moreover, it should not be a potpourri of services that yield limited results.

**Additional research.** Last, in lieu of the recommendation appealing to advocates of children to spearhead a political action movement regarding improvement of the foster care system, the researcher suggests additional research on various aspects pertaining to the subject of foster care. Researchers must exploit this topic to ensure radical change
within the foster care system. For example, a follow-up study in about five years should be conducted to determine what percentage of these foster children will successfully graduate from college, and to obtain their perception regarding what contributed to their success. Participants described their struggles regarding meeting the high school graduation requirement. At that time, they were still under the auspices of the foster care system. Based on the current foster care aging out process, within five years they would have aged out of the system. Of grave concern was the fact that each of the study’s participants was not out of the woods regarding having hurdles to overcome. While each of the foster children was in college at the time of the interview, they continued to experience problematic lives. Based on these factors, and with prospect of aging out of the foster care system, graduating from college could meet with some obstacles. Thus there are compelling reasons to further this research.

**Conclusion**

In this section the essential features of each chapter are reviewed. Compelling highlights from each chapter are revisited and the section ends with the author’s summary of important results and her reflections.

Chapter 1 provides a compelling rationale for the need to pursue this research. The focus of this study is to assist foster children in attaining a life of worthwhile existence. As foster children continue to experience a meaningless life, consisting of dropping out of high school, homelessness, and incarceration, stakeholders must help to improve their educational outcomes and ultimately their lives. Through this study, the exploration of transitional services is examined because the subject had not been exhausted.
Three notable theorists have emerged as the scholars in the field. Chapter 2 provides a literature review that examines the research of the three key theorists. Their studies highlight the subject of transitional services from various perspectives. Kohler (1993, 1996) investigated exemplary programs and showed positive student results. Geenen (Geenen & Powers, 2004, 2006) conducted a study that compared outcomes of transitional services for foster care and special education, foster care only, special education students only, and the general education only populations. Pecora (Pecora et al., 2003, 2006) reviewed data of former foster children who were in care within the Casey Family Program.

Kohler’s (1996) taxonomy helps the entire community, including special education administrators, transition specialists, and state transition projects, to identify exemplary national transitional practices and programs. Kohler suggests that the perceptions of students regarding their transition experience should be pursued. Gaps in public school system student services because of foster children’s changes in school must be addressed.

Geenen and Power’s (2006) study investigates four student populations in the State of Oregon in the area of special education, general education, and foster care. While transitional services were provided to all identified populations, the outcomes for the foster child with a disability had depressing results. Geenen’s study attributed these findings to instability in foster care, such as a change in schools, adjusting to a new educational setting and school systems failure to provide necessary educational supports as mandated by a student’s IEP (Geenen & Powers, 2006).
In the Casey Alumni Study (Pecora et al., 2003, 2006), the foster care agency devoted a substantial amount of resources to foster children, including child assessment, case planning, intervention strategies, and ancillary services, with an emphasis on extracurricular activities, independent living and educational and/or vocational training (Pecora et al., 2003). The Casey Alumni Study demonstrated that the implementation of effective transitional services yields positive outcomes. While there will be some overlapping of services for special education services, all foster children require transitional planning in order to meet their postsecondary goals and to have better long-term results. Therefore, public and private agencies must ensure that students receive transition services and must assist in the development of foster children’s skills.

Chapter 3 outlined the research methodology, including a summary of the elements utilized in this qualitative study. The research design was an interview instrument. This instrument was selected because of its appropriateness for the student population and because it is described as a valuable tool (Patton, 1990). Additionally, the advantages of a face-to-face interview stems from its effectiveness in gathering data. In addition, it can be taped, and the interviewer can pick up on body language to obtain more thorough and detailed responses.

The population and sample participants included college students who are foster children. The sample size consisted of 17 participants who were interviewed at an agency located in the New York City area. The study used a purposeful selection criterion, which enabled a cross-section of participants to give perceptions and opinions of their education experiences. The interview instrument was pretested on focus group high school students to determine validity and reliability. The researcher is a foster parent.
and is an educational administrator, making her an insider and an outsider (positionality), and a part of the world being studied (reflexivity); thereby, there were concerns for bias. This bias was addressed by allowing students to have their own voice in response to open ended questions. Also, the questionnaire was administered by the researcher face-to-face and scored by an assistant researcher. The data was collected through recording and note taking at a foster care agency. Students’ names will be kept confidential and will not be released within this dissertation or to others as outlined in the informed consent.

Grounded theory was the method that was utilized for collecting data. This approach is referred to in research as being “grounded” in data (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis included coding. SPSS software was utilized to complete, organize and analyze the findings of the study. A limitation of the study was the generalization of results.

According to Maxwell (2005) there are four key elements to a research design, (a) the relationship that emerges between the researcher and the participants, (b) the location of the research site and participants, (c) the data collection methodology, and (d) the techniques and strategies utilized for data analysis. These components, coupled with techniques for guaranteeing validity, provide a foundation for exploring research and formulating research questions. These key elements are designed to allow for a certain amount of flexibility to respond to the variability of the process. These key elements have been included in the research design as outlined above.

Chapter 4 answers the research questions, conducts a data analysis and reveals the study’s findings. Through a data analysis, this qualitative study sought to determine whether there was a connection between transitional services and meeting the high school
graduation requirement. There were many examples of how transitional services helped participants meet the graduation requirement. Moreover, the study sought to obtain foster children’s perception of their foster care and high school experience. It was the researcher’s intention to gain a broader insight of what helped and hindered foster children from graduating from high school to assist future foster children in meeting the high school graduation requirement. In addition, the researcher’s objective was to provide foster care agencies with a thorough understanding of those factors that increase the chances of foster children graduating from high school.

Through a thorough investigation of 13 individual interviews and a focus group, the researcher received rich textural data in which 10 major themes emerged including intrinsic and extrinsic responses to what helped and hindered the participants from graduating from high school. These responses substantiated the coordinated planned activities that were utilized to foster children meeting their postsecondary goals. Foster children expressed being involved in internships, extracurricular activities, tutoring, counseling and career exploration courses.

The researcher was able to establish triangulation by using two different methods of cross analysis, which included individual interviews and a focus group interview. Through a descriptive analysis and cross analysis the responses lead to the same result. The area of transitional services received a lot of emphasis during the individual and focus group interviews. Transitional services ranked number five in the key findings affecting a student’s ability to graduate. As a result, receiving transitional services is significant to foster children meeting the graduation rate. In addition, transition services were also integrated into other factors which affect foster children’s ability to graduate.
from high school. These factors includes, sense of purpose/ “Aha” moment, agency services, college planning, recognition of strengths, vocational enthusiasm, extracurricular activities and participation in unrequired activities. By this definition, realizing ones’ dreams is accomplished through a set of coordinated activities which are known as transitional services. Another example includes recognition of strengths and their utility; assessing student strengths, needs, interests, and preferences is a fundamental element of providing transitional services. Vocational Enthusiasm, this is a concentration of a student’s career objective. Agency Services/programs/contact are a coordinated set of activities and participation in activities to explore interest/for pleasure is a way of assessing student strengths, needs, interests, and preferences which are components of transitional services.

Some participants described receiving a lot of support while others stated they had to advocate for themselves. While no two stories were the same, many of their stores lead to the same results. They all encountered tremendous obstacles and many paid the price emotionally for their efforts. Yet each one of these foster children went on to college despite the probability of them being a youth at risk.

While each of these participants articulated their desire to reach their postsecondary goals, they nevertheless have a history of overcoming challenges. In some instances, they continued to face major dilemmas at the time of the interviews.

The themes that emerged were grouped into three major categories linked to foster children graduating from high school. The three categories are, self-efficacy, emotional stability, and services. These categories define the significant factors that impact foster care children’s ability to obtain a high school diploma. Yet, the area of
emotional troubles received the greatest combined response and the highest response from the participants interviewed individually. The overwhelming response to this category must be addressed in order that foster children can be successful.

Unfortunately, at the time of the interviews, several of the foster children described having to work on their mental health issues. This authenticates why members of the focus group would rank having a lack of interest in school as the most important factor impacting their ability to graduate from high school. Along these lines, participants interviewed individually ranked this area fifth in importance. They demonstrated this lack of interest by being truant from school, which was another major theme.

Despite the chaotic family circumstances that these foster children had to endure, they were caring, considerate, loving, and conscientious. They expressed genuine concern and compassion for others. Many of the research participant’s career objectives are to be service providers with an emphasis on helping others. They are in pursuit of careers including nursing, social work, teaching, firefighting, police officer, detective, speech pathology, criminal justice, and communication disorders to name a few. They want to ensure the safety and welfare of mankind. They know better than most the importance of this. Subsequently, they want to break the vicious cycle. This goal begins with getting a high school diploma. In this regard, the findings indicate that transition services were a major factor in foster children graduating from high school.

Chapter 5 concludes the study by outlining the implications of the findings, the limitations of the study and making recommendations based on the results of the study. In short, the implications of findings reveal that foster care agencies can achieve successful outcomes for foster care children by providing them with the necessary
transitional services to assist them in meeting the graduation requirement. In addition, foster care agencies must assist foster care children to develop self-efficacy skills, resolve their emotional issues and must incorporate a holistic approach to providing services to foster children. If foster care agencies provide foster children with the essential resources to meet their postsecondary goals, it will increase their graduation rate and reduce their homelessness, incarceration and the dependency on public assistance.

The limitation of the study is the fact that the study was conducted within one agency and the inability to generalize results. As a result, the perceptions of these foster children may not be applicable to other foster care settings. In addition, time did not permit the researcher the opportunity to reach all the students that met the selection criteria with the foster care agency.

In summation, the researcher makes five recommendations to assist foster children graduate from high school and meet their postsecondary goals. The five recommendations are, (a) a transition mandate commencing at age 15 for foster children, similar to the provisions outlined by IDEA for special education students; (b) a mandate to increase the aging out limitation, which would foster a holistic approach to providing assistance beyond the age of 21; (c) a mandate to hire an educational specialist within the foster care agencies to assist foster children in meeting their postsecondary goals; (d) a call for the commitment of politicians and lawmakers to spearhead change in the foster care system, which will provide a remedy to inconsistencies in policies affecting children at risk; and (e) a follow-up study to assess the perception of what helped and hindered foster children to graduate from college despite their circumstances.
Most foster children age out of foster care and lack the essential skills necessary to survive after leaving the system. At age 21 foster children are no longer entitled to receive services within the foster care system. Unfortunately, without a high school diploma, numerous foster children end up on public assistance. In addition, they have no place to go. Lacking the critical skills needed to transition into adulthood, many of these students are destined to fail. For example, of the foster children who age-out of foster care, about one-quarter of the men experience incarceration. This research demonstrates the positive association between foster children graduating from high school and their prior exposure to transition goal setting.

This study shows through participants’ accounts how children’s foster-care experience increased their high school graduation rate. The words of the participants reveal that the self-activated factors of having a sense of their own purpose and awareness of their dreams and goals is an important influence in achieving high school graduation. Perhaps equally important is the encouragement and challenging that qualified, attentive, and loving counselors, teachers, administrators, and those in dedicated positions, such as educational specialists, can provide. Most important is that these factors have a more powerful influence than any negative factors might have.
References


Appendix A: Face-to-Face Interview Questionnaire

1. Can you describe your journey and how you managed to succeed, where so many others did not?

2. When you entered foster care, what were your dreams for the future?

3. What were they when you entered high school?

4. Can you describe your vision of the perfect high school and what it might offer a child faced with the challenges of living in foster care?

5. If you had to pick two essential resources in that perfect high school to assist foster children to do well, can you tell me what they would be and describe why it is important to a child?

6. How did you identify and develop your strengths during high school?

7. What are your strengths?

8. How did these strengths relate to your career interests and how did you discover your interest?

9. Were there any behaviors you believe you had undertaken that might have interfered with your success during high school?

10. Did you address these behaviors?

11. What activities did you participate in during high school?

12. What community activities id you participate in?

13. Were there obstacles that prevented you from on-going involvement?

14. What helped you stay out of trouble or assisted you to do well in school?

15. What type of courses did you take in high school?

16. Did you have a main course of study when you were in high school?

17. Did you feel challenged?

18. Can you describe some of the services you received at school and from your foster care agency that supported you during your stay in foster care?
19. Can you provide examples of services that added to your success?

20. Do you know what transitional services are?

21. If yes, were you ever exposed to transitional services and if so, did it help?

22. During your last year of high school, what was the factor that contributed most to help you to achieve your goal to graduate?

23. Were there services that you needed but were not available and/or difficult to access?

24. What was the most significant factor that helped you to finish and attend college?

25. What support systems were in place to help you to get to college?

26. Can you provide examples of what positive things happened during your time in high school that helped you to be successful?

27. Do you see yourself as being successful?

28. What contributed to your success?

29. Are there programs or services that made a difference?

30. Is there a person that really made a difference?

31. If you had advise to give to a student in foster care who entered at the same time you entered, what would you tell them regarding, how to survive and how to succeed?

Thank you very much for participating in this interview. Your response will assist in improving the lives of other foster children.
Appendix B : Informed Consent

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Study: *The effects of transitional goal-setting and programming on increasing the number of children in foster care who will meet the high school graduation requirement.*

Name of Researcher: Kim Smith, Doctoral Candidate at the St. John Fisher College

Faculty Supervisor: Claudia L. Edwards, Ph.D.

Faculty Supervisor phone number: (914) 654-5379

Purpose of Study: The study seeks to determine whether there is a relation between foster children graduating from high school and transition goal setting. Former foster or current foster children will be interviewed and asked to share their experiences to assist in improving the educational experiences for other foster children facing similar gaps in their education. The study will gather perceptions of college students who successfully graduated from high school to determine the extent to which transitional services played a role in their academic success. Findings will provide invaluable information on the type of educational plans that will increase rates of success. The purpose of this study is to learn about the lives of former or current foster children who graduated from high school and are currently attending college. What were their experiences in the public school educational system and what do they feel contributed to their graduating from high school. In addition, the study will look at common problems that impact the graduation rate of children in foster care. Students will also be asked to make recommendations regarding how to improve educational opportunities for children in foster care. Ultimately, it is hoped that the results of this study will prove to be valuable in enhancing the educational experiences for children currently in foster care in ways that might lead to them graduating from high school.

Approval of Study: This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB).
Place of Study: College of New Rochelle

Length of Participation: Each participant will participate in one face-to-face interview for approximately 60 minutes.

Risks and Benefits: There are no known risks for students who participate in this study. The benefits to the participant include receiving $25 for transportation and a chance to win a $25.00 raffle ticket at a drawing at the conclusion of the interviews. More importantly, as a result of this research, they may have the satisfaction of having contributed in helping to increase the graduation rate of children currently in foster care.

Method for Protecting Confidentiality/Privacy: Research participants’ identity and any specific information will remain strictly confidential and will not be shared in the dissertation or with school personnel. With the participant’s permission, all interviews will be taped. The participants name will not be used on tape or notes. All research materials will be maintained in a locked cabinet at the school district and at the researcher’s home. Once the research project is completed, all recordings and notes will be destroyed.

Participants’ rights: Participants have the following rights:

1. The right to refuse to answer any question without consequences.
2. The right to withdraw from interview without consequences.
3. The right to receive a full explanation of the purpose of study including the risks and benefits.
4. The right, if any, of any advantageous procedures or course of treatment.
5. The right to be informed of the results of the study.

Contacts: If you have any questions, you can contact me at (845) 729-6638 or kimmsmith@aol.com or contact my advisor Dr. Claudia Edwards at (914) 654-5379 or claudiaedwards@optonline.net. Should you suffer any emotional or physical discomfort as a result of the interview, please feel free to contact St. John Fisher College of Academic Affairs at (585) 385-8034 for assistance.

I have read the informed consent. I agree with the terms of the informed consent. I signed the informed consent and give permission for ______________________________ to participate in this study. I received a signed copy of the informed consent.
Appendix C: Student Assent

STUDENT ASSENT FORM

My name is Kim Smith. I am a student at St. John Fisher College at the College of New Rochelle and a Supervisor of Special Education in the Mount Vernon City School District. I am doing a study to see if I can help foster care children who have had similar experiences as you, graduate from high school. The Mount Vernon City School district has nominated you to participate in this study because you are a tremendous success story and it is believe that you can help other foster care children be successful in school. You will need to meet with me for about one hour, one time only. I will ask you about 10 questions about your school experience to find out what you think will help other students graduate from high school.

You will receive $25.00 for transportation. In addition, you will receive a raffle ticket to participate in a drawing when I complete interviewing all the participants. The prize might be a $25.00 gift card to your favorite store or movies. When I work with you, you can take a break any time you need to. Also, if you do not want to complete the interview, you do not have to and you can stop right away. I will not be mad at you. Anything you say will be between you and me, and will be locked in my file cabinet so
that no one will be able to see it except for my professor and me. Do you have any questions?

If I can interview you, please sign your name below.

________________________________________
Student's Signature                        Date

________________________________________
Researcher's Signature                     Date
Kim Smith (845) 729-6638 / kimmsmith@aol.com
### Appendix D: Subcategories Simplified

**Table D.1**

**Subcategories Simplified**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Sources of help (intrinsic or self-activated)</td>
<td>Sense of purpose/awareness of dreams&lt;br&gt;Learning from other people’s mistakes&lt;br&gt;Focus&lt;br&gt;Take on extra workload&lt;br&gt;Vocational enthusiasm&lt;br&gt;Memory of late loved one’s expectations&lt;br&gt;Self-motivation&lt;br&gt;Self-awareness/“Aha!” moment&lt;br&gt;Drive to heal&lt;br&gt;Recognition of strengths and/or utility&lt;br&gt;Recognition of weaknesses&lt;br&gt;Participation in activities to explore interests/for pleasure&lt;br&gt;Understanding effort yields success/discovering “I can”&lt;br&gt;Enjoyment of learning&lt;br&gt;Past experiences of success&lt;br&gt;Ability to move on from past troubles—positive attitude&lt;br&gt;Avoid friends of unhealthy influence&lt;br&gt;Proud of accomplishments/feel successful&lt;br&gt;Perceived negative consequences&lt;br&gt;Courage&lt;br&gt;Role models&lt;br&gt;Self-confidence&lt;br&gt;Value education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Sources of help (extrinsic)</td>
<td>Kinship care makes FC easier&lt;br&gt;encouragement/“pushing”&lt;br&gt;Must keep grades up to participate in EC activities&lt;br&gt;Somebody to talk to/emotional support/love&lt;br&gt;Academic support&lt;br&gt;Supportive HS staff/atmosphere&lt;br&gt;EC activities&lt;br&gt;Seclusion&lt;br&gt;Consequences/structure at home&lt;br&gt;Stipend for attending mandatory meetings&lt;br&gt;Transitional services&lt;br&gt;Reward: financial or material</td>
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<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs provided for</td>
<td>College planning/preparation support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency services/programs/contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition/Honor Roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Academic opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Difficulties / Sources of struggles (extrinsic)</td>
<td>Jumping from HS to HS or placement to placement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Difficult childhood/family life</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discouragement from loved ones</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being in a minority group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsupportive HS/agency staff/atmosphere</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peer harassment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Friends/dating as a distraction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Group home living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Being alone/away from family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pregnancy interrupts life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unsupportive foster parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Difficulties / Sources of struggles (intrinsic)</td>
<td>Disrespecting others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Truancy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of interest in school/studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional troubles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Difficulty with subject matter/copious homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of positive experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Interactions with FC agency</td>
<td>Infrequent visits due to distance from home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Awareness programs exist, lack of use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attend mandatory meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t need agency education programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No programs due to location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caseworker visits</td>
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Appendix E: Intrinsic/Extrinsic Data Frequencies

Table E.1

Focus Group Interview, Sources of Help (Intrinsic)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of purpose/awareness of dreams</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>7.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>28.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Take on extra workload</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>32.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational enthusiasm</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>43.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory of late loved one’s expectations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>47.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>52.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness/“Aha” moment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>53.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive to heal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>55.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of strengths and/or their utility</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>70.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in unrequired activities to explore interests/for pleasure</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>82.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding that effort yields success/discovering “I can”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>85.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past experiences of success</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>86.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to move on from past mistakes/problems—keep a positive attitude</td>
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<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid friends of unhealthy influence</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1.5</td>
<td>91.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud of accomplishments/feel successful</td>
<td>4</td>
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<td>97.0</td>
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<td>Perceived negative consequences</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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### Table E.2

*Focus Group Interview, Sources of Help (Extrinsic)*

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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinship care makes FC easier</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encouragement / “pushing”</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>23.7</td>
<td>25.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirement to keep grades up to participate in EC activities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>32.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody to talk to / emotional support / love</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>37.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>44.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive HS staff / atmosphere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC activities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>54.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seclusion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>57.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences / structure at home</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>62.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stipend contingent on attendance of mandatory meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>64.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional services</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>86.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward: financial or material</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>89.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs provided for</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>94.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College planning / preparation support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>98.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency services / programs / contact</td>
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<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>59</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* FC = Foster Care, EC = Extracurricular, HS = High School.
### Table E.3

**Focus Group, Difficulties and Sources of Struggles (Extrinsic)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jumping from HS to HS or placement to placement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult childhood / family life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>11.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouragement from loved ones</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>23.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being in a minority group</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive HS/agency staff/atmosphere</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>47.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of encouragement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>58.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer harassment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>64.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends / dating of unhealthy influence / as a distraction</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>82.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group home living</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>94.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being alone / away from family</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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</table>

*Note.* HS = High School

### Table E.4

**Focus Group, Difficulties, Sources of Struggles (Intrinsic)**

<table>
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<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disrespecting others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest in school / classes / studies</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional troubles</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with subject matter / amount of homework</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>87.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of positive experiences</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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Table E.5

*Focus Group, Interactions with Foster Care Agency*

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Infrequent visits due to distance from home</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness programs exist, lack of use</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend mandatory meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t need agency education programs—already know</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No programs due to location</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>88.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseworker visits</td>
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<td>11.1</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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Table E.6

_Individual Interviews, Sources of Help (Intrinsic)_

<table>
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<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of purpose/awareness of dreams</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning from other people’s mistakes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>36.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take on extra workload</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>38.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational enthusiasm</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>4.9</td>
<td>43.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memory of late loved one’s expectations</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-motivation</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>49.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-awareness/“Aha” moment</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>60.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drive to heal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>65.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of strengths and/or their utility</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>70.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in unrequired activities to explore interests/for pleasure</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding that effort yields success/discovering “I can”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>74.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enjoyment of learning</td>
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<td>.8</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>75.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to move on from past mistakes/problems — keep a positive attitude</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid friends of unhealthy influence</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>83.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud of accomplishments/feel successful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>84.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived negative consequences</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courage</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>93.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role models</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>.8</td>
<td>97.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value education</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>244</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing System</td>
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<td>.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>246</td>
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</tr>
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</table>
Table E.7

*Individual Interviews, Sources of Help (Extrinsic)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kinship care makes FC easier</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encouragement/“pushing”</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>35.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requirement to keep grades up to participate in EC activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>37.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somebody to talk to/emotional support/love</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>13.4</td>
<td>50.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>52.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive HS staff/atmosphere</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>57.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EC activities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consequences/structure at home</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transitional services</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>72.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reward: financial or material</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>74.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needs provided for</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>76.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College planning/preparation support</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>81.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency services/programs/contact</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>95.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition/Honor Roll</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>96.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic opportunities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>97</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* FC = Foster Care, EC = Extracurricular, HS = High School
### Table E.8

**Individual Interviews, Difficulties and Sources of Struggles (Extrinsic)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jumping from HS to HS or placement to placement</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficult childhood/family life</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discouragement from loved ones</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>23.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive HS/agency staff/atmosphere</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of encouragement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>53.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends/dating of unhealthy influence/as a distraction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>56.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group home living</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>59.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being alone/away from family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>66.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy interrupts life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>71.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial constraints</td>
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<td>5.1</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>76.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logistical constraints</td>
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<td>7.7</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>84.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsupportive foster parent</td>
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<td>15.4</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>39</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* HS = High School

### Table E.9

**Individual Interviews, Difficulties, Sources of Struggles (Intrinsic)**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Truancy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of interest in school / classes / studies</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>25.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional troubles</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>67.7</td>
<td>93.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty with subject matter / amount of homework</td>
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<td>6.5</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
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</table>
Table E.10

*Individual Interviews, Interactions With Foster Care Agency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attend mandatory meetings</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>100.0</td>
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