CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SAN MARCOS

PROJECT SIGNATURE PAGE

PROJECT SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

IN

EDUCATION

PROJECT TITLE: Understanding the Impact of Foster Care on Students: An Information and Resource Website for Teachers - nstillhope.com

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DATE OF SUCCESSFUL DEFENSE: April 30, 2015

THE PROJECT HAS BEEN ACCEPTED BY THE PROJECT COMMITTEE IN
PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN
EDUCATION

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Understanding the Impact of Foster Care on Students:

An Information and Resource Website

for Teachers - nstillhope.com

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Education

California State University San Marcos

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Abstract

Knowing the realities of being a youth in foster care is important for all involved in the raising of these youth, as this information can bring change and advocacy for ensuring their needs are identified and met. This project explored how teachers can support and care for students in the foster care system. Findings suggest teachers can support this vulnerable population of students by understanding the foster care experience and providing a caring atmosphere that is considerate of the difficulties and experiences these youth encounter. Based upon a review of the current literature and organizations that work to improve the educational outcomes for youth in foster care, an information and resource website, nstillhope.com, was developed to educate teachers about the foster care experience. The website provides information on the various issues that prevent youth in foster care from succeeding in school that contribute to impoverished life outcomes. It highlights the systemic issues in child welfare and education to provide a historical background. It shares promising changes through child welfare and education to inform teachers of the rights and services youth in foster care are entitled to. The last section is a collection of resources the author gathered from organizations and child advocacy groups, to help transition students into the learning atmosphere. These agencies have created strategies, tips, and suggestions for improving the social and emotional well-being of students.

Keywords: advocacy, education, foster care, resources, risk factors, teachers, well-being, youth in foster care
Acknowledgements

I first and foremost give honor and praise to God, my Father. It is by your grace that I have openly accepted the call on my life to teach, encourage, and advocate for children. You have given me your heart to see and stop for the one.

Second, I want to give credit and thanks to my earthly father and champion. You have helped me in more ways than I can ever thank you for; I love you dad! Mom; you instilled in me passion, courage, and how to persevere through hardship. Abigail, ever since you were a baby, your mom has been in school. I want to thank you for your understanding and support, but most of all for being you! You bring me so much joy! I give my siblings a special place in my heart during this process. Personally, we have been through a storm together, but the light that shines after is always the most brilliant. Thanks for the garden! I especially want to thank my man for loving me through this process and fighting the good fight with me. Marty, you have been a covering for me; my intercessor, my encourager, and best friend. I could not have done this without you.

Dr. Lustig, you informed me about the impact of foster care on youth. From your lectures, I was inspired to help fan the flame of those that advocate for youth in foster care. I knew I had to do something about the lack of information in schools to support these incredible youth. Thanks for letting me share your work! To Dr. Olivas, thank you for your guidance and excellent editing support. To all of the child advocates that diligently labor for the issues and needs of youth in foster care to become visible; it is through your work, these youth are beginning to get the support they so desperately need. Thank you for letting me share your findings and resources. The icing on the cake goes to Jacqueline Thousand. You are one innovative and incredibly brilliant person! You are changing the world of education. You have
written most of my textbooks that have given me true perspective of what it means to be a 
quality educator. Yet you have taken the time to listen to me, encourage me, and guide me 
through this process. Your integrity and belief in people is contagious and inspiring. For this, I 
am forever grateful. Thank you!
Chapter I: Introduction

The last class the author had to take in order to fulfill the graduate program was about schooling in a multicultural society. As it turned out, the professor of the class serves as the program manager for Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services of San Diego County Office of Education. Many high-risk student populations were discussed throughout the course. One evening had primary emphasis on the educational impact of foster care and as such, brought insight into the issues of life and schooling of children and youth in the foster care system; a student population that goes largely unnoticed in education. Presented in the proceeding pages is only a snapshot of information, as this project is meant to stir the reader to question and consider ones role in the matter as it did the author. It is meant to cause the reader to become deeply informed.

Primary sources for data on children and family well-being report that in the United States over 600,000 children and youth are living in foster care. As of July 1st, 2013 there were 58,699 children in California, making California the state with the largest population of youth in foster care. Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego counties have the greatest number of children served in foster (Kids Count, 2014; Children's Bureau & Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System [AFCARS], 2013).

Research suggests that youth (i.e., children from birth through age 21) in foster care often are in a state of turmoil, transition, and distress, having been removed from their families for reasons of abuse, neglect, and/or concern for safety. The effects of trauma and separation can, for many, have lasting consequences. While most children have parents to guard, monitor, and ensure their well-being, as the National Center for Youth Law Foster Youth Education Initiative (2010) note, youth in foster care have become "... 'wards of the state', (para 1).” The experience
of children and youth witnessing or being victims of child maltreatment, followed by the removal of those closest to them has implications that affect quality of life and outcomes attributed to a negative sense of well-being. Historically ignored or unnoticed, these youth have been left to navigate on their own and find alternate ways to survive, which for many can have devastating outcomes.

King County Superior Courts indicate that 54% of youth in foster care demonstrate high rates of clinical health diagnoses, higher incidences of being medicated, social and emotional problems, and/or developmental delays well into adulthood (Lustig, 2013). Educational outcomes also are impacted, with 54% percent of foster youth not graduating high school, and less than 3% going on to college (Cooper, 2013; Legal Center for Foster Care & Education, 2014; The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc, 2008). Further, three out of 10 can be predicted to become homeless and 27% of males and 10% of females are likely to be incarcerated (Lustig, 2013). Youth who have been in foster care have a 30% more likelihood of becoming substance abusers and 50% more likely to experience domestic violence (Lustig, 2013). Finally, youth in foster care comprise 75% of the youth in the criminal justice system (Bayles and Cohen, 1995; Lustig, 2013). These statistics are startling at the least. According to Lustig (2013), a typical child in foster care in San Diego County will:

- live in 10 different foster homes or group homes;
- often be separated from his or siblings; and
- often be re-traumatized by the act of being placed.

Even worse outcomes can be predicted for youth of color (Lustig, 2013; Zetlin and Weinberg, 2004).
Statement of Problem

Several studies have examined the experiences of former youth in foster care (Frerer, 2013; Navarjo, 2013; Pecora, 2012; Pecora, et al., 2006; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006) and described the difficulties and barriers of growing up in the foster care system. Researchers agree there are systemic issues in many areas in our society that make the caring of and implementation of supports for youth in foster care challenging for educators (Berliner & the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010; California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2007). However, evidence in examining factors for success reveal education may be the only sure factor to beat the odds of poverty, crime, and further reliance on the welfare system (Pecora et al., 2006; The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc, 2008; Vacca, 2008). In a recent report by the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, (2014), "education provides opportunities for improved well-being in physical, intellectual, and social domains during critical developmental periods and supports economic success in adult life" (para 1). Stated otherwise, teachers and schools serving these children have the opportunity for the greatest change.

The barriers and issues that prevent youth in foster care from succeeding in school and beyond has been examined extensively in literature (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc., 2008; Cole et al., 2005). Graduate coursework offered the author further information on potential detrimental effects of being a youth in foster care, stirring her desire to educate teachers to better meet the needs of youth in foster care. The professor spoke specifically about why educators need to know about students in foster care. As teachers in a graduate program, we were likely to have this population of students in our classrooms. Further, that the needs of youth in foster care has historically gone
unnoticed by schools for several reasons. First, school administrators and teachers receive little or no training on the foster care system or on the impact of the foster care experience. Second, communication between the education and child welfare systems historically has been difficult. Finally, education is under tremendous pressure to increase Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and Academic Performance Indicator (API) scores, so other issues (such as supporting youth in foster care) have fallen to the wayside (Lustig, 2013).

While the author had some background in the area of foster care, the author never considered how being a ward of the state can greatly reduce a child’s chance for success in school. As a new teacher, it has been the author’s own experience that there is a lack of training of teachers on the plight these youth face. This might be because foster youth go unrecognized as a student population, placing them further at risk for school failure. Desiring to share what the author learned about the educational impact of foster care, the author was compelled to make her learnings about this student population and their need for specialized support and advocacy more readily available and widely known to schools and teachers. The implications of teachers not knowing about foster care and its impact on students can be the perpetuation of these youth going further unrecognized in schools. Unless teachers gain knowledge that youth in foster care rarely make it through school successfully and that just being in foster care poses a significant threat to their overall well-being and quality of life as adults, students will have little hope in school which research suggests has the greatest potential to help (FosterEd., 2015; Pecora, 2012; Zetlin et al., 2004).

Although getting involved in the personal lives and issues of students may be controversial to some, educators must know that these are students in desperate need of support, guidance, and advocacy.
Purpose of Project

The manager for Foster Youth and Homeless Education Services of San Diego County Office of Education inspired the development of the website that is the product of this project. Learning of the alarming numbers of youth who drop out of school along with the likely discouraging life outcomes sparked questions for the author and desire for further study in this area. The author wanted to know more about the issues that prevent youth in foster care from succeeding in school and life. The author began a journey into the world of foster care with the driving question: “How can youth in foster care be best supported and well cared for in school?”

After reviewing and gathering information from research on the issues with which these youth struggle, the author identified a need for teachers to have increased awareness and training on the foster care experience, as supports for teachers appear to be scant in the literature. The author’s scouring of the internet did yield several valuable resources that had been developed specifically for teachers. However, the author wanted to create a single place where information valuable and applicable to teachers could more easily be found. This desire led to the creation of a website that includes information and resources for teachers, which the author considered to contribute to the well-being and success of students in the classroom. In summary, the purpose of this project was to develop an information and resource website for teachers that equipped them to better understand and support their students in the foster care system.

Significance and Rationale of Project

When confronted with the challenge of meeting the needs of youth in foster care, there is little direct information for teachers to help students in foster care. By becoming aware of the barriers and potential impoverished life outcomes of these youth through exposure to the website, teachers can be better equipped to address the unique educational needs of youth in
These unique needs include "high risk for memory problems, attention difficulties, sleep and mood disorders, emotional problems, and chronic health problems such as asthma and malnutrition" (Zetlin & Weinberg, 2004, p. 921). Further, knowing about the rights and services available to these youth may give teachers a platform to advocate for their students ensuring they receive what is allotted to them through law.

It is imperative that this student population be recognized as at-risk for academic failure, which can result in devastating life outcomes. This website offers educators information and resources to support their students immediately. Teachers can acquire knowledge of the foster care system, the implications of being a ward of the state, and how to support their students in the classroom. The website is intended to highlight the importance of the role of schools and teachers in caring for these students as well as the educational and foster care systems working together to best support the well-being and education of students. In addition, knowing the rights and services provided by law will help assist teachers to promote youth in foster care getting the external supports they may need and help their students successfully navigate through the bureaucracy of the child welfare system, school, and courts.

**Conclusion**

The implications of educators not knowing the impact of how the foster care experience impacts students can perpetuate the problem of students going unrecognized in school. As such, this is the catalyst for this project. In the public school system, there is a need for teachers and administrators to have increased knowledge about who youth in foster care are as well as the obstacles that stand in their way. This project responds to the need to inform educators about the foster care experience, promote educators’ awareness of the need to be sensitive to a multitude of trauma and adversity issues, and offer a platform for educational advocacy. It is intended to
increase teachers’ awareness of the child welfare system and highlight the significant role schools can play in creating a caring community and advocate for these youth. This is a global issue that takes multiple perspectives of thought, attitudes, and social justice into account.

**Definitions of Terms**

**Aging Out**

Aging out is when a youth leaves foster care because they have reached age 21 without returning home or being adopted (The Martin Pollack Project, Inc., 2007).

**At-Risk Students**

Levin (1989) defines at-risk students as “those who lack the home and community resources to benefit from conventional schooling practices. Because of poverty, cultural differences, broken families, or linguistic differences, they tend to have low academic achievement and to experience high secondary school dropout rates. Typically, such students are concentrated among minority groups, immigrants, non-English-speaking families, families headed by single mothers, and economically disadvantaged groups” (p. 47).

**Child Neglect**

Child neglect may be defined as the failure to provide for a child’s basic physical, emotional, or educational needs or to protect a child from harm or potential harm. This includes physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical/dental neglect, educational neglect, inadequate supervision, and exposure to violent environments (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008).

**Foster Care**

The federal definition of foster care is as follows (Public Welfare, 45 C.F.R §1355.20, 2011).
[Foster care is] 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the State agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes, but is not limited to, placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child care institutions, and preadoptive homes. A child is in foster care in accordance with this definition regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed and payments are made by the State or local agency for the care of the child, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption, or whether there is Federal matching of any payments that are made. (p. 276)

**Maltreatment**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention defines maltreatment as any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent (custodial and noncustodial parent) or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008). The terms “maltreatment” and “abuse” are often used interchangeably in literature. However, in this project, “maltreatment” is a general term that includes both abuse and neglect; “abuse” refers explicitly to acts of commission.

**Mental Health**

Mental health is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community. The positive dimension of mental health is stressed in WHO's definition of health as contained in its constitution: "Health is a state
of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (World Health Organization, 2015, para 1-2).

**Physical Abuse**

“Physical abuse means causing or attempting to cause physical pain or injury. It can result from punching, beating, kicking, burning, or harming a child in other ways. Sometimes, an injury occurs when a punishment is not appropriate for a child's age or condition. Physical abuse can consist of a single act or several acts. In extreme cases, it can result in death" (National Traumatic Stress Network, 2015, para 8).

**Resilience**

Berliner and Lezin (2012) give a definition of resilience (p. 9), "Resilience has been defined as 'struggling well' or as the capacity to rebound from adversity. It is 'an active process of endurance, self-righting, and growth in response to crisis and challenge'" (as cited in Walsh, F., 1998).

**Trauma**

According to Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010), "[t]rauma typically can include physical and/or psychological components, such as serious physical injury or shock, or an experience that is emotionally painful, distressing, or shocking that leads to mental and physical effect (p. 5)."

For children and youth in foster care, the trauma they experience has been more appropriately defined as *complex trauma*. However, for this project the author uses *trauma* to include the National Traumatic Stress Network (2015) definition for complex trauma articulated here.
The term complex trauma describes the problem of children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development. Typically, complex trauma exposure involves the simultaneous or sequential occurrence of child maltreatment—including psychological maltreatment, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and domestic violence—that is chronic, begins in early childhood, and occurs within the primary caregiving system. Exposure to these initial traumatic experiences—and the resulting emotional dysregulation and the loss of safety, direction, and the ability to detect or respond to danger cues—often sets off a chain of events leading to subsequent or repeated trauma exposure in adolescence and adulthood. (para 2)

**Youth in Foster Care.** The author has chosen to embrace "respectful language" when referring to all children and youth living in the foster care system as opposed to foster children or youth. In the words of a former youth in foster care, author Price, (2014), "The 'foster kid' label generates a body jerk to those who are, or were, in the foster care system. We hang our heads or shift eye contact in the abyss of shame, anticipating the explanation that is likely to follow: an immediate, 'ooohhhhh, oooooo.' The label envelopes the person in negativity and devalues the person as an individual" (para 4) Price gives evidence as to the integrity of our speech; "People First Language was created by individuals who said 'we are not our disabilities.' Let’s transform that spider web to spinning a golden quilt of acceptance. Our youth are people first" (para 13).
Chapter II: Review of Literature

Youth in foster care come to school every day with considerable needs that go unmet, making youth in foster care the most educationally vulnerable student population (Vacca, 2008). Fortunately, this population of students has caught the eye of several child advocacy groups and key advocates in the field of supporting these youth have recognized and report that education is the lifeline for these youth (FosterEd, 2015; Pecora, 2012). As such, there have been many positive changes and improvements in legislation to ensure students have access to education. While professionals in the field for advocating for youth in foster care are at work, personnel in public schools are just beginning to learn how to implement these strategies. In the meantime, the area of how teachers can support youth in foster care in the classroom remains to be a dilemma as researchers are unsure of how to implement any one strategy. According to the researchers at West Ed, who piloted a two year initiative investigating the barriers to youth in foster care obtaining an education, “…America’s educators and institutions have a scant research base to draw on when creating and implementing education strategies specifically for children and youth in foster care (Berliner and Lezin, 2012, para 3).

Findings from research suggest that teachers can support youth in foster care by becoming informed of the foster care experience and helping students by creating a caring and welcoming environment that is sensitive to the many issues these youth are confronted with. By giving insight into the disadvantages and issues of youth in foster care, the historical difficulties in child welfare, and improvements in education, teachers may gain further understanding of the students they may serve in the classroom. It is therefore, the author’s aim to gather information and supports for the creation of this project by investigating further the issues and barriers that prevent these youth from succeeding in school and beyond.
It posed quite a challenge to the author to locate literature in the actual education of these youth once in the classroom. The website developed by the author is designed to inform educators about the barriers youth in foster care have in obtaining an education that result in devastating life outcomes. This provided the author greater reason for taking action to bring to the forefront in education the well-being of youth in foster care.

Risk Factors and Life Outcomes

Because of the experiences youth in foster care may encounter, many of these children are coming to school with tremendous issues. Statistics reveal that the issues these youth experience have an incredible impact on their overall sense of well-being, so much so that youth in foster care rarely make it through their school years successfully. Research reveals that there are definite risk factors for youth in foster care that have a direct impact on their well-being (Frerer, 2013). Promises2Kids (2013), a nonprofit organization that responds to the needs of youth in foster care and fights against child abuse and neglect in San Diego County, reports statistics in their Foster Care Facts document. Among these statistics are the following:

- At least 38% of foster youth in California experience 5 or more placements.
- Of foster youth in California 73% spend two or more years in the foster care system.
- Studies have shown that an average of 61% of children entering the foster care system test positive for developmental delay, in contrast with the general population average of 4 to 10%.
- In San Diego County, there are approximately 3,112 children in foster care. Of these, 2,849 have one or more siblings. Of the 2,849 that have a sibling, 508 are separated from one or more of their siblings.
• Many young children who enter the foster care system are further traumatized as they are placed in a different home than their brother or sister.

• State funding only partially covers the costs of basic care for foster kids (Promises2Kids, 2013).

The literature that defines the characteristics of youth in foster care all point towards external factors that are outside of their control. Zetlin and Weinberg (2004), leading authors in literature on supporting the education of youth in foster care, have identified the following characteristics of the families of children who come into foster care:

• poor support systems;

• weak family attachments;

• lack of consistent discipline;

• high crime neighborhoods; and

• physical or sexual abuse and/or neglect.

Additionally, individuals who have been in foster care are at great risk of relying on public assistance, having an early pregnancy, and being involved in the criminal justice system (Lustig, 2013; Vacca, 2008).

**Tendency toward delinquent behaviors.** Cole et al. (2005) produced a report and policy agenda looking at the impact of children traumatized by family violence. They cite one particular study on adverse childhood experiences that examined adults that had previously been exposed to domestic violence or suffered abuse as a child. The study found that exposure to family violence and abuse resulted in a greater tendency for youth to participate in activities such as smoking, drinking, and substance abuse. These "risky behaviors" are considered coping devices that may reduce the emotional impact of maltreatment. The issue for youth in foster care
is that while these may be "coping devices," students are often disciplined and face being suspended or expelled because of these behaviors. In addition, national data on the outcomes during transition from care to adulthood predict that the "approximately 80% of foster children experience mental health challenges including depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts and others related to their traumatic past (Promises2Kids, 2013)"

To add to these trajectories, in a state survey of California's state prison system, policy makers and researchers report that a significant percentage of our nation's youth in foster care have been accused of crimes or have had contact with law enforcement within the first few years after they "aged out" of the foster care system (California Senate Office of Research, 2011). Further research indicates that 75% of our nation's inmates were once children and youth in the foster care system (California Senate Office of Research, 2011).

The educational impact of trauma. For children that have been maltreated, student's academic performance, behavior, and relationships with other people suffer. In understanding the impact on children that have experienced abuse and/or neglect, authors Cole et al. (2005) report that "many of the obstacles traumatized children face in the classroom result from their inability to process information, meaningfully distinguish between threatening and non-threatening situations, form trusting relationships with adults, and modulate their emotions" (p. 32). In Grappling With the Gaps: Toward a Research Agenda to Meet the Educational Needs of Children and Youth in Foster Care, Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, (2010) converse about the effects of trauma on learning. They report that "[b]rain science research on the effects of trauma, according to the group of experts, has the potential to eventually reach the classroom in the form of interactions and teaching tools to address associated symptoms such as learning difficulties and problematic behaviors" (p. 5). There
appears to be a gap in information and professional development in this area calling for more research to be done as "trauma can effect cognitive and socio-emotional functioning, and both memory and behavior relate to learning" (p. 5). Cole et al., (2005) report that schools are a significant community for children and that teachers are their primary role models. As such, the authors strongly urge policy makers for the need to support teachers in adequately addressing the impact of trauma on student learning.

**Special education.** Research reveals there is a disproportionate number of children who are in foster care being placed into special education programs; namely 25 to 52 percent as compared to 10 to 12 percent in the general student population (Berrick et al., 1993; Parrish et al., 2001). There are differences in opinion as to why youth in foster care are so overrepresented in special education. Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010) in their group findings comment, "behavior problems associated with the foster care experience can masquerade as delays and disabilities, and assessments don’t seem to detect this" (p. 7).

For youth in foster care, the family institution is one that plays a key role in the development of young people. Separation from family members and siblings exacerbates great feelings of loss as students try to sort out being detached from their loved ones. Thus, the next sub section looks at the role of family attachments on student well-being.

**Weak family attachments.** One thing youth in foster care have in common is their lack of a strong family structure to support and care for them. Once youth enter into the foster care system, they face separation from their family, culture, and community. In a study examining resistance strategies of formerly institutionalized youth, the author shares her personal story of being a youth in the foster care system. Naranjo (2013), shares her experiences and struggles of identity loss. She concludes that separating children from their parents is destructive to the
development and well-being of youth, as it has deeply rooted negative effects on the "emotions, self-esteem, self-determination, and attainment of knowledge impairing their ability to navigate successfully through life (Naranjo, 2013, p. 12). These acts create feelings of great loss, rejection, and alienation from others and the educational process. Cornbluth (n.d), author of *The Ambiguous Foster Child*, elaborates in her following words.

Have you ever lost something you know still exists? Perhaps it was an old picture, a sentimental letter or your favorite pair of shoes. Initially, you search and search for the item but you cannot recover it. It eats away at you, day after day, until you are lucky enough to be reunited with it. When this happens, you give a big sigh of relief, the panic eventually subsides and you move forward with your life.

This same scenario can apply to children in the foster care system. They have been separated from what is most precious to them, their families. They know that their family members still exist, but they cannot live with them. Clearly, those children who are reunited with their families feel a great sense of relief. The children who remain in care hold onto the hope of reunifying with their families as long as they are in foster care. Their losses are unresolved. (para 1-2)

For children in foster care, emotional and social well-being difficulties manifest themselves often in undesirable behaviors. The following subtheme explores some challenges for teachers in addressing behavioral difficulties of children that have been maltreated.

**Behavioral challenges.** Researchers have found that teachers are unsure of how to handle the behaviors of children that have been victims of abuse and/or neglect (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc., 2008).
McKellor, (2000), an associate professor of school psychology at Wichita State University, describes school difficulties for youth in foster care; namely, the following:

- Behaviors are more prevalent in youth in foster care than their same aged peers.
- Youth in foster care often do poorly in unstructured activities such as recess.
- Youth in foster care have a tendency to be easily victimized, which may lead to them starting fights. This can elicit unwanted aggressive behavior from their peers who may be perceived as treating them as did their biological parents. This reinforces their belief that he or she is bad and deserving of abuse.
- May test the limits of authority, have angry outbursts when asked to do something, or avoid contact with authority figures.
- Teachers have noted particularly poor attention and work study habits in some youth in foster care.
- Among youth in foster care, there is a disproportionate number of youth placed into special education with a high prevalence of emotional disturbance, and conduct disorder.

Researchers have found that teachers are unsure of how to handle the behaviors of children that have been maltreated (Cole et al., 2005). The next literature theme identifies historically what the problems have been in assisting youth in education.

**Systemic Issues in Child Welfare and Education**

Because youth in foster care are identified as wards of the state, it is imperative to look at the social service system that is responsible for caring for youth that are removed from their families due to neglect and/or abuse. A primary role has been to secure the safety of youth in foster care and to ensure basic needs are met (Public Welfare, 45 C.F.R §1355.25., 2011; Vacca, 2008). The child welfare system’s main function has been to ensure children are safe from
danger, leaving schooling of foster youth overlooked (Schubert, 2001). Another problem is that agencies responsible for a child's foster placement often do not share important information such as the student's educational background and academic needs in a timely manner (Schubert, 2001). The key players responsible for the child's care - caseworkers, foster parents, and schools - are often in the dark, further perpetuating poor academic outcomes for these youth (Schubert, 2001).

**Academic achievement.** Research reveals foster youth have exceptional educational needs and a considerable achievement gap compared to students in the general population as well as those in the other subgroups. Cooper (2013) is an attorney at the National Center for Youth Law, a center that focuses upon improving the educational outcomes of children and youth in foster care across the state of California. According to Cooper, youth in foster care face a unique set of educational challenges to the extent that nationally, their educational outcomes are significantly worse than similarly economically disadvantaged students. Additionally, Cooper notes that, when compared with the general population, youth in foster care:

a) have significantly higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals;
b) are more likely to perform below grade level (75 % perform below grade level);
c) are about twice as likely to be held back in school (83 % are held back by third grade);
d) drop out of school nearly twice as frequently (only 50 % obtain a high school diploma/GED); and
e) attend a four-year college at a significantly lower rate (fewer than 3 % do so).

**School access and placement instability.** Placement instability and school disruption are of major concern for youth in foster care. These two factors can contribute to negative life consequences, such as low-self-esteem, lower academic achievement, and behavioral/mental
health issues (Naranjo, 2013). Due to the instability of home life, removal from homes into a foster home or group home yields high mobility, frequent transitions, and a fragmented upbringing. This fragmentation poses as a major threat to academic success. The academic gap, when a change of placement is made seriously undermines educational success for youth in foster care (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc., 2008). Children in California who change schools even once during high school are less than half as likely to graduate (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc, 2008).

In 2007, the California Foster Youth Education Task Force held a statewide summit convening former youth in foster care, current youth in foster care, educational leaders and professionals to address issues that prevent youth from succeeding in education. In the opening remarks of the summit, Superintendent for Public Instruction, Jack O'Connell, summarized the challenge by stating, "While significant progress has been made to address the educational barriers faced by California's foster children and improve their opportunities for academic success, there is still much more that needs to be accomplished" (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, p. 5, 2006).

The summit yielded recommendations for improving the educational success of youth in foster care. A major finding was that although there have been key policy improvements, policy implementation remains on on-going challenge (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2007). A second finding from the summit is that the educational system is not "designed" to adequately support youth who experience these multiple placements and frequent school changes. In the area of academic support, the following six major areas were examined by the workgroup: 1) students at risk of retention, 2) quality services to meet academic needs, 3) special
education, 4) English learners and limited English proficient students, 5) migrant students, and 6) No Child Left Behind. The recommendations for improving academic achievement are as follows:

- coordinate child welfare, education, mental health, and probation systems to improve communication and coordination;
- increase teachers' and school administrators' understanding of youth in foster care,
- ensure academic readiness for graduation;
- expand and enhance the role of foster youth liaisons;
- ensure access to services provided by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act;
- address issues affecting students at "risk of retention" early in the school year; and
- explore statewide implementation of promising tutorial and academic support programs.

While the majority of these recommendations deal with systemic issues in collaboration and policy implementation, the recommendation to increase teachers' and school administrators' understanding of youth in foster care is one schools can act on now. This was a catalyst for this author to adhere and to get to know the leading advocacy groups experienced in the foster care system and to create a resource to inform the public and teachers about foster care and its impact on students.

**Collaboration between agencies.** Collaboration between social services and the public school system have historically been poor in addressing the educational needs of youth in foster care in public education. Privacy laws and concerns about inappropriate sharing of records have created a major disconnect between schools and social services. School records are typically incomplete, missing important documents such as transcripts and immunization records, and delay school enrollment (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2006). Issues of trauma from abuse and/or
neglect; disruption from frequent moves and school transfers; and lack of adequate nurturing, guidance, and support all become part of the role of educators.

Because children and youth in foster care lack parents to advocate on their behalf and experience poor school achievement, researchers agree that it is critical for public schools and child welfare agencies closely work together to develop formal procedures for communicating. Researchers agree that this is an effective approach in identifying school problems and addressing barriers to school progress (Zetlin, 2006).

**Promising Changes: Child Welfare and Education Joining Forces**

Due to the efforts of advocates for youth in foster care, the next section reviews how California state mandates have adjusted and adopted new policies to ensure schools not only have access to but also are working with social services to promote stability in school life. While social services have historically paid little attention to the education of youth in foster care, we are gaining ground as more legislative laws are put into effect and a partnership between the two systems are beginning to work together in a cohesive partnership.

**Rights and services to meet academic needs.** With all of the efforts to address the obstacles to youth in foster care obtaining an education, several policies have been implemented to support these youth. The California Foster Youth Education Task Force, a coalition of organizations in California, is changing the way the needs of youth in foster care are identified and supported. One primary piece of evidence set into motion for these youth is Assembly Bill 490 (AB 490), which became effective January 1, 2004. Authors of AB 490 report that the intent of the law is to ensure youth in foster care are provided with proper educational opportunities, stating that "if these provisions are followed, they should facilitate stability and educational
opportunity in the best interest of each child in foster care” (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2006, p. 5).

According to the California Foster Youth Education Task Force, AB 490 does address many of the barriers to equal educational opportunity for children and youth in foster care. It mandates that school districts, county social service agencies, and other professionals take responsibility to facilitate educational equity for all youth in foster care. It also is designed to increase school placement stability and improve school transfer procedures. It defines the role of caregivers as well as the responsibilities of school districts, social workers, and others involved in the lives of these youth. Provisions also consider bases for placement, school of origin, immediate enrollment, the role of a school district foster care liaison, preference for mainstream school, timely transfer of records, protection for grades, partial credits, and case worker and probation officer access to school records (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2006). Yet, the remaining challenge to schools is the implementation of these policies of collaboration and access (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2007).

Regardless of the poor outcomes youth in foster care experience, and while child advocates work to improve and find ways to implement these changes, the aspirations and dreams of youth in foster care remain high (Lustig, 2013). A report from Illinois, Iowa and Wisconsin shared findings that 80% of youth in foster care aspire to go onto college or enroll in postsecondary training (Courtney et al., 2004).
Training Needs for Teachers

In the Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010) *Grappling with the Gaps* publication, the "experts" observe that the development of teacher skills, training, and support need to occur in order to improve academic outcomes for youth in foster care as it "appears to be nonexistent" and that "[s]chools are starved for this information and want classroom solutions" (p. 5). They conclude that the "evidence on effective teaching of children and youth in foster care is so thin that 'we haven't separated out what part of what we're seeing in student performance is student effect, teacher effect, school effect, or system effect'" (p. 5).

How teachers can best support and care for youth in foster care in their classrooms is still an unanswered question. However, the Stuart Foundation’s *Ready to Succeed* (RTS) initiative to improve educational outcomes for youth in foster care is helping public education and child welfare systems work together more cohesively at local and state levels. This initiative had an emphasis named Supports for Students and Teachers that attempts to address the questions and challenges teachers are confronted with when working with youth in care (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc, 2008). Results from the RTS initiative confirm that many educators are unaware of how to address, in particular, the needs of children whose life situations and behaviors impede their learning and the learning of their peers. Among the questions that teachers specifically wanted to learn more about are the following:

- What is the foster care system?
- How long do children stay in care?
- Why are they placed in care?
- Who is responsible for decision making and support of these students?
• How do I handle the behaviors of youth in foster care might exhibit, given their trauma?

As the majority of youth in foster care have the highest enrollments in underperforming schools, they recommend professional development on promising effective instructional practices.

The literature identifies students in foster care as having many challenges that interfere with success in school. Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010) describe this situation as follows:

Since children and youth in foster care lack parents to advocate for their educational interests, they depend on the adults in their lives to navigate the school, child welfare, and judicial system. 'Education is the work of childhood,' explained one of the experts, 'and it’s our job to advocate.' The experts were of one mind: foster parents, educators, case workers, judges and others often lack the knowledge, skills, training, and support to effectively advocate and, likewise, there is a need for more and better information to put into their practice. (p. 8)

In summary, in order for youth in foster care to have the type and level support and care in the classroom they may need, teachers must first know that this is a student population that is in their classrooms. They need information to raise their awareness, understanding, differentiation, and advocacy. The literature confirms this professional development need for teachers regarding the foster care experience and creating a caring environment that is sensitive to the issues students experience daily (California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2007; Cole et al., 2005; Lustig, 2013; The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental
Health Advocacy Services Inc, 2008; The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010).

Summary

Chapter 2 has examined the impact of the foster care experience on youth in foster care, with a focus upon the difficulties in schooling and after-school life. The implications were shared to reveal the need for a strong support system in school. It explored how schools and teachers can support youth in foster care by gaining background knowledge of the experiences and issues these youth encounter. It provided the historical challenges and difficulties in education, the promising changes that are currently beginning to change the outcomes for students in foster care, and lastly the importance of teachers and their role in supporting youth in the classroom.
Chapter III: Methodology

Setting the Context

The purpose of this project was to develop a website that could potentially foster awareness and develop knowledge of resources and instructional skills among teachers as well as encourage advocacy for students in foster care. The name of the website is nstillhope with the URL of http://www.nstillhope.com. The website is intended to offer teachers information on the impact of foster care on student well-being as well as provide them with resource documents, web links, publications, and tools to support these youth. This chapter describes the audience and the procedures employed to develop this website.

Audience and Setting

The author saw the need for a website designed specifically for educators to help them better transition and support youth in foster care in their classrooms. The author wanted to make it easy for educators to gain the knowledge they need all at one website. The audience, therefore, is any human service provider or educator in any educational setting who has or may have a student in foster care and who could benefit from learning how to support this underrepresented group. This website is particularly designed to support general and special educators in knowing what resources are available to them to support their students in foster care.

Procedures

Literature Review

The author wanted to share with educators, information that she had learned from her review of the literature and her search regarding support services for youth in foster care. As the current literature demonstrates, there is a need for everyone working with these youth to become aware of challenges and issues they face. Being an educator formerly unaware of this
information, the author researched as part of the literature review for this project the topics presented in Chapter 3. In an attempt to answer the question of how teachers can support and care for youth in foster care, the author began looking for online sources supporting these youth. What was found provided the basis for this project.

The next step was determining how this information could be accessible to teachers when confronted with the challenge of supporting youth in their classrooms. The information and resources the author found were through Internet searches and hunting through multiple websites for resources that have been made available on the web. Many organizations and advocacy groups have online information for teachers. The author decided there needed to be a centralized website where all of these resources could be in one place.

Getting Permission to Use Web Material from Other Sites

The author found that there are several top advocacy groups that work specifically on improving the educational outcomes for youth in foster care. As such, some of these organizations have created tips, suggestions, and training packages specifically for helping youth succeed in school. The author requested permission from these top advocacy groups to use these resources to share with teachers. The permission request consisted of an email message introducing myself (the author) as a graduate student from California State University San Marcos. I gave a short summary of the purpose of my project, and asked permission to share their agency or organization on my website. For those organizations that had created packets, trainings, resources, and tools on their sites, the author specified which resources she wished to share on her site. The communication produced positive results, with the author having received a reply from most. A few organizations and private party groups requested to view the website before agreeing to release the information, which meant developing an ongoing relationship via
email. The website I created includes only information for which I have permission. See Appendix A for a sample e-mail message and response.

**Choosing the Website Domain and Host**

A colleague suggested using the Go Daddy website builder as it was suited to website builders who have little or no experience with website configurations. I took my colleague’s advice and purchased a domain for which I came up with nstillhope.com website domain name. I originally purchased both .net and .com addresses to ensure user accessibility in case they typed in the either .com or .net. The word "hope" was the first name that came to the author’s mind when thinking about the needs of youth in foster care, because hope is a powerful determining factor in overcome difficulties. The author also played around with the word "instill" and came up with the domain name of nstillhope.

Go Daddy has built-in templates and website builder packages that include hosting privileges. The author originally selected Web Builder 7 as the web building tool, but found it too restrictive for the style and content of the desired site. Due to frustration and inexperience with web design, the author cancelled my Web Builder 7 order and upgraded to Managed Word Press through Go Daddy, which provided the author with the same support but more flexibility. However, with more options and flexibility came further requirements to learn a more complex program. This would have required an 8 to 12-hours of learning curve. Due to time constraints, the author chose not to engage in this study. She chose to return to using Web Builder 7 since she already had spent time learning the program. Fortunately, Go Daddy has 24-hour customer service, which the author took advantage of at every turn. After becoming familiar with the tools and navigation system to create nstillhope.com, the overall process was quite easy.

The following is an outline of the website organization.
Website Sections

1. Home Page

The home page, *An Information and Resource Site for Teachers to Help Support Your Students in Foster Care*, tells viewers what they will find on the site. There is an introduction note from me (the author) that explains why I created the site and the site’s purpose. Viewers can access my background and reasons for investing in this topic at the a) Contact and b) Background locations.

2. The Impact

On this page, viewers can go directly to content into subcategories for easy viewing. This is the area where the author’s research literature is presented. Subsections include:

a) Information for Teachers - Youth in Foster Care "Embracing Respectful Language"

b) Risk Factors & Life Outcomes

c) Systemic Issues

d) Promising Changes - What Teachers Can Do to Help Students in Foster Care

3. Foster Care

This page offers information about the foster care system. It includes web links to agencies and other important information on child welfare.

4. Tools

This section features several tools for teachers to better support their students in the classroom. Included are tips, suggestions, strategies for inclusion, and behavior management supports. Four tools are the following:

a) Meeting the Educational Needs of Students in the Child Welfare System; A Tool for Teachers (from Juvenile Law Center and Education Law Center, 2012).
c) Ready to Succeed in the Classroom; Findings from Teacher Discussion Groups on their Experiences and Aspirations Teaching Students in the Foster Care System (from The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010).

d) Child Trauma Tool Kit for Educators (from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008).

e) Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Helping traumatized Children Learn: Supportive School Environments for Children Traumatized by Family Violence (from Cole et al., 2005)

Also included are the following:

i) Drop Down Menu of Glossary of Key Terms

ii) Glossary of Foster Care Terms

5. Resources

This page contains helpful web links and other resources and direct viewers to such as leading advocacy groups, information on foster care, educational supports, books for children, and more.

6. Rights and Services

This section features rights and services to ensure youth in foster care get what they need to succeed in school. Included are multiple choices where teachers can find and review the key provisions in law, such as a Power Point slide show that can be downloaded.

Website Look and Background Images

Because children and youth in foster care have the potential to overcome the adversity in their lives, the author chose to include photos that she had taken that reflect beauty after a
struggle. Examples include the sunrise after the night, flowers growing in the desert, and
butterflies as they symbolize new life and transformation.

Summary

This chapter described the process of developing a website to raise awareness and
provide resources that teachers can access to support their students in foster care in the
classroom. The content of this website is a response to the need to create educator understanding
of the foster care experience.
Chapter IV: Results

The website product of this project, http://www.nstillhope.com, is intended for any human service provider, particularly teachers, serving students who are in foster care. The website is ongoing work in progress. Content will be added and supplemented as the author further develops the site.

Screen shots of the website pages completed at the time of the submission of this project are presented in the remainder of the chapter. Brief descriptions of each page appear below each page.

Above is part 1 of the home page. This shows the viewer what they will find on the website. These headings are linked to other pages on the website.
Above is part 2 of the home page. It introduces the author and reasoning for developing the website. Viewers can link directly to the research and findings.
This is part 1 of The Impact. This page directs viewers to research and key findings from the drop down menu or from the themed boxes.

Above is part 2 of The Impact page. It also summarizes the key findings from literature in the blue box.
FOSTER CARE FOR TEACHERS

Introduction

Primary sources for data on children and family well-being report that in the United States over 400,000 children and youth are living in foster care. As of July 1st, 2019 there were 400,000 children in California, making California the state with the largest population of youth in foster care. Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Diego counties have the greatest number of children served in foster care (Kidd, 2018). Children's Bureau & Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (ACARS), 2013).

Research suggests that youth (i.e., children from birth through age 21) in foster care often are in a state of turmoil, transition, and distress, having been removed from their families for reasons of abuse, neglect, and/or concern for safety. The effects of trauma and separation can, for many, have lasting consequences. While most children have parents to care, monitor, and ensure their well-being, as the National Center for Learning in Action Youth Education Initiative (2010) note, youth in foster care have become “...victims of the state...” (p. 3). The experience of children and youth involving or being victims of child maltreatment, followed by the tapering of those stressors or interventions that effect quality of life and outcomes attributable to negative well-being. Historically ignored or unacknowledged, these youth have been left to navigate on their own and find alternate ways to survive, which for many can have devastating outcomes.

King County Superior Courts indicate that 54% of youth in foster care demonstrate high levels of clinical health diagnoses, higher

Why?

The needs of youth in foster care have historically been understated by policymakers and advocates for several reasons.

- School administrators and teachers receive little or no training on the foster care system or on the impact of the foster care experience.
- Communication between the education and child welfare systems traditionally has been difficult.
- Education is under tremendous pressure to increase Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and Academic Performance Indicator (API) scores, no other issues (such as supporting youth in foster care) have fallen to the wayside (Lauding, 2012).

The Problem

Several studies have examined the experiences of former youth in foster care (e.g., 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015; 2016; 2017; 2018) and described the difficulties and barriers they face in the foster care system.

Researchers agree that there are systemic issues in many areas of our society that make the caring for and implementation of supports for youth in foster care challenging for educators (Steffin & the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010; California Foster Youth Education Task Force, 2007).
Above is Info for Teachers. This is found under the Impact heading or by clicking on Understanding the Impact of Foster Care on Students button. This section identifies the problem. It shows statistics and a video.

Above is a drop down page called Youth in Foster Care; Embracing Respectful Language.
Above is page 1 of the Foster Care page. It has information about being a child in the child welfare system and important documents and links to learn more about how the child welfare system works.
Above is part 2 of the Foster Care page.
Above is the Tool page that outlines each of the tool components. It provides direct links to open each document.

Above is part 2 of the Tools page.
Above is a Glossary of Key Terms page found under Tools. This includes all of the key terms from the author's research and other key terms related to foster care.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Physical Abuse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Physical abuse means causing or attempting to cause physical pain or injury. It can result from punching, beating, kicking, burning, or harming a child in other ways. Sometimes, an injury occurs when a punishment is not appropriate for a child's age or condition. Physical abuse can consist of a single act or several acts. In extreme cases, it can result in death&quot; (National Traumatic Stress Network, 2015, para 2).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resilience</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berliner and Ladin (2012) give a definition of resilience (p. 6), “Resilience has been defined as ‘an ability to bounce back from adversity. It is an effective process of endurance, self-rigidity, and growth in response to adversity and challenge’” (as cited in Wilson, F., 1998).</td>
</tr>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trauma</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>According to Berliner and the Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning (2010), “Trauma typically can include physical and/or psychological components, such as serious physical injury or illness, or an experience that is emotionally painful, distressing, or shocking that leads to mental and physical illness (p. 2).”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For children and youth in foster care, the trauma they experience has been more appropriately defined as complex trauma. However, for this project the author uses trauma to include the National Traumatic Stress Network (2015) definition for complex trauma articulated here.

The term complex trauma describes the problem of children's exposure to multiple or prolonged traumatic events and the impact of this exposure on their development. Typically, complex trauma exposure involves the simultaneous or sequential occurrence of child maltreatment—including psychological maltreatment, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and domestic violence—that begins in early childhood, occurs within the primary caregiving system, exposure to these initial traumatic experiences—and the resulting emotional dysregulation and the loss of safety, trust, and the ability to detect or respond to danger cues—often set off a chain of events leading to subsequent or repeated trauma exposure in adolescence and adulthood (para 2).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth in Foster Care</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The author has chosen to embrace &quot;respectful language&quot; when referring to all children and youth living in the foster care system as opposed to foster children or youth: In the words of a former youth in foster care, author Price, (2014); &quot;The 'foster kid' label generated a body part in those who were, or were, in the foster care system. We hang our heads or shift our feet in the abyss of shame, anticipating the accusation that is likely to follow: an immediate, ‘shooohhhhh, oooodoo.’ This label stigmatizes the person in negativity and disvalues the person as an individual (para 4). Price gives evidence as to the integrity of our speech: ‘People, First Language, was created by individuals who past lives are not our disabilities. Let’s transform thatelier wish to spinning a golden quilt of acceptance. Our youth are people first.’ (para 13).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Above is part 2 of Glossary and Key Terms.
Above is the Resource page. It is a directory of all foster care and youth in care related services.
Above is the Rights and Services page. This page has links to legislative factsheets, documents, and other related artifacts.
Chapter V: Discussion

Considering the disadvantages and issues of youth in foster care, the purpose of this project was to develop a website to assist teachers to discover how these children can be supported and well cared for in the classroom. Teachers, across the board, demonstrate a longing to be better equipped to reach the needs of these children (The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning and Mental Health Advocacy Services Inc., 2008). Although the issues and disadvantages of youth in foster care is vastly analyzed in the literature, the literature suggests there is a significant need for increasing awareness among teachers of the foster care experience and how it impacts the well being of youth in care. As a new teacher, it is the author's experience that knowledge of the foster care experience is not yet integrated into the preparation and training of teachers. Considering the disadvantages and issues of youth in foster care, the guiding question for this project was “How can teachers support and care for youth in foster care in the classroom?"

The result of this project is a website that adds to the current body of literature by addressing the need for training educators about the impact of the foster care experience. This is a student population that can go largely unrecognized in schools. The information in schools and in teacher training programs regarding this population is scant. This website developed through this project - nstillhope.com- builds upon the existing literature, with a specific aim of addressing student's needs in the classroom by sharing existing information at a single website location. It is the author’s hope that this site will help as a preventative tool, bringing teachers awareness of this unique population of students in a number of ways. The website is intended to answer questions teachers have about youth in foster care, provide them with suggestions on how to include youth in foster care in a supportive learning atmosphere.
Limitations of Project

The author acknowledges that the website completed for this project is only a beginning to providing information to teachers on how to help support youth in foster care. The author acknowledges that the validity of the website is limited to the author's own research, experience, and opinion.

Next Steps and Future Implementation

The consistency and central role teachers can play in the life of youth in foster care has the potential for a significant affirmative platform for future development (Zetlin et al., 2004). Since information on supporting youth in foster care in the classroom is limited in literature, broadening the scope to include other disadvantaged and at-risk youth populations might yield valuable results. Because children that have been exposed to high levels of trauma are more likely to encounter "problem or anti-social behaviors" (Zetlin and Weinberg, 2004, p. 920), strategies know or reducing risk, in general, would also be important future information to add to the website.

There are many youth formerly in foster care who have attributed their success to having a mentor who helped them through negative life events (Pecora, 2012). Thus, investigating resiliency strategies of formerly institutionalized youth would be a contributing factor for improving the well being of children and youth in foster care (Berliner and Lezin, 2012). The author suggests further investigation of this content to add to the website in its future further development.

Conclusion

"Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a longing fulfilled is a tree of life."

Proverbs 13:12
This project is intended to bring to light the potential we as educators have to instill hope in the lives of our students. Adversity and the impact of foster care do not have to define the future of youth in care. May this project be taken to heart and compel teachers to find ways to help those in foster care by taking the time to stop, listen, and respond in a manner to assist these youth to overcome the obstacles in their lives. "Shifting the balance or tripping the scales from vulnerability to resilience…[this can happen as a result of] one person or one opportunity" (Bernard, 1991, p. 22).
References


Appendix A

Sample Email Message
Email Sent to the Stuart Foundation

Response From the Stuart Foundation

Hi Naomi,

Thank you for reaching out to the Stuart Foundation and we are happy to have you use any of the resources on the website in your work. I also wanted to direct you to the WestEd website whose we worked with to create resources specifically for teachers. Here are some links below:

http://www.wested.org/resources/centerview-ready-to-succeed
If you have any questions, please let me know.

Best,

Jennifer

Program Associate, Child Welfare

..............................

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