EXPLORING FOSTER PARENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR
ROLE IN ENCOURAGING FOSTER YOUTH TO PURSUE A
POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

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By
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my thesis to my parents, Rick and Cheryl, whose unwavering support and encouragement has made all the difference in my life. I would not be the person I am today without you both. I love you with all my heart.

Also, to my best friend Greg, your story inspired me to write this. Always remember that your past does not have to define you but simply remind you of how far you have come in life. I am so grateful for you. You inspire me every day.
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ABSTRACT

Foster youth in general tend to experience less success in terms of education compared to their non-foster youth peers. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the fact that foster youth may lack the parental support that has been shown to be a very important factor in a youth’s education. Parental support can be a very important motivating factor when deciding whether or not to pursue a post-secondary education. Majority of foster youth have been removed from their biological parents and placed into the care of foster parents. This qualitative study surveys foster parents to determine what they believe their role is when it comes to encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. In addition, this study looks at the ways in which foster parents encourage their youth as well as any changes in the amount of encouragement they provide as a result of the AB 12 legislation. A total of seven surveys were collected from foster parents affiliated with a Foster Family Agency in the Central Valley. Results of this study show that a majority of the foster parents surveyed agree that it is part of their role to encourage their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education after high school. Results also indicate that most of the encouragement that takes places between foster parents and foster youth takes the form of discussions around the topic of post-secondary education and that only about half of the participants reported that the AB 12 legislation had any effect on the amount of encouragement they provided to their foster youth.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problem

Nationally, approximately 28,000 youth age out of foster care each year (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children’s Bureau, Children’s Bureau Express, 2012). It is no surprise that not only the children within the foster care system but also those who have emancipated out of the system face an abundance of challenges when it comes to succeeding in educational achievement. Children within the foster care system are often bounced from home to home which often results in bouncing from school to school as well. This constant and sometimes unanticipated change in schools leaves foster youth scrambling to catch up, which is often times an overwhelming task. When it comes to high school graduation rates, between 54% and 58% of former foster youth will have earned a high school diploma by the age of 19 (Benedetto, 2005).

Of the less than 60% of foster youth who will earn a high school degree, even fewer will go on to pursue higher education. At age 19, only 18% of foster youth are pursuing a four-year degree, compared to 62% of their peers (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2009). The challenges faced by those who have emancipated out of the foster care system are just as numerous as the challenges they faced while in foster care. Foster care alumni are often left to deal with issues of homelessness,
unemployment and reliance on government assistance (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). These issues can all be correlated with a lack of educational achievement.

So why is it that foster youth are less successful in achieving a post-secondary education compared to their non-foster youth peers? Much research has been done as to why so many foster youth struggle in life after emancipation. Researchers have found that foster youth are generally unprepared to succeed after foster care at the age of 18 for a number of reasons. One reason is that for many foster youth once they turn 18 and emancipate out of the system they have nowhere to go. A series of studies conducted on the topic revealed that between 10% and 36% of foster care alumni were homeless for a period of time after emancipating (Choca et al., 2004.) Having to worry about where you are going to sleep, bathe, and eat each day is a traumatic enough experience without the added pressure and stress of homework, grades, and tests.

One of the most important issues foster youth face after emancipation is their lack of support. This lack of support, without question, has an impact on their ability to succeed in higher education after foster care. According to Tierney and Auerbach (2005) parental educational level, parental encouragement, as well as parents’ educational aspirations for their children have all been named as predictors for college enrollment in a youth’s life. The problem for foster children is that they are separated from their biological families during their childhood, and often times are then separated from their foster families at the age of 18 when they emancipate from
the foster care system, due to either a choice of their own or the desires of the foster family. Many of these foster youth may not be receiving the encouragement they need from either their biological or foster families and, therefore, may feel no need or desire to pursue a post-secondary education.

Brayfield (2006) investigated foster parent views toward encouraging foster youth to pursue postsecondary education. In Brayfield’s (2006) study, encouragement to pursue post-secondary education was defined as, “the foster parent engaging in conversation with the foster youth about the advantages of higher education and assisting them in looking for schools, applying for financial aid, and locating scholarships” (p. 3). Results of this study revealed that the foster parent participants focused more on teaching life skills, encouraging independence, and pushing for pursuing employment as opposed to focusing on pursuing a post-secondary education. Foster parents in this study were more apt to teach their foster youth the value of a dollar and encourage the pursuit of a career than to focus on higher education.

Many things have changed since 2006; the economy has undergone drastic changes since then, and new legislation has been passed regarding the amount of time foster youth are allowed to remain in foster care. In September 2010, the California Fostering Connections to Success Act or AB 12 was signed into law. One of the intents of the Act was to extend the amount of time a foster youth could be assigned a “non-minor dependent” status, which would hopefully assist youth in becoming better prepared for successful transition into adulthood and self-sufficiency through
education and employment training opportunities. As of early 2014 non-minor dependents, which are what foster youth are referred to once they turn 18, are allowed to remain in the system until they reach the age of 21 depending, of course, on state budget limitations. In order to be able to remain in the system, however, non-minor dependents must meet one of the following criteria. They must be completing high school or an equivalent program, enrolled in post-secondary education which can include college, community college or a vocational education program, working for a minimum of 80 hours a month, involved in a program designed to promote or remove barriers to employment, or be unable to do one of the previous listed activities due to a medical condition.

If a non-minor dependent is able to meet one of the criteria listed above, he or she is able to remain in the foster care system. By extending the time they are able to remain in the system the hope is that these individuals will have an easier transition into adulthood. This transition can potentially be made easier by providing them with a variety of living options including remaining in the foster home, living in a group home setting, or living in a supervised independent living setting. In addition to being provided with housing options, the non-minor dependents will also be provided with support in the form of the foster family if he or she chooses to continue to reside with the family and has the support of a social worker. This support and easier transition into adulthood will hopefully encourage more and more non-minor dependents to pursue post-secondary education by making the option to do so possible.
Parental support can be a very important motivating factor when deciding whether or not to pursue a post-secondary education. Many foster youth have no relationships with their biological families, so a logical substitution for a main source of support would fall onto the foster parents and families. Foster parents and the support and encouragement they are able to provide can have a significant impact on foster youth and the decisions they make, just as the encouragement and support of biological parents would.

**Statement of Purpose**

Research points to the amount of encouragement youth receive as being a significant factor in the decision to pursue post-secondary education and the ability to succeed in obtaining a post-secondary education. Foster parents play a crucial role in the lives of foster youth. The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which foster parents encouraged foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education, if, in fact, they did so. In addition to exploring the ways in which foster parents encouraged foster youth, this study attempted to identify any changes in the ways foster parents encouraged foster youth and the amount of encouragement provided by foster parents in regards to foster youth pursuing a post-secondary education as a result of the new AB 12 legislation.

The questions guiding this research study were: (1) What do foster parents perceive as their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education? (2) What activities are foster parents engaging in with their foster youth to encourage them to pursue a post-secondary education? (3) Has the passing of the AB
12 legislation impacted the amount of encouragement, or the ways in which foster parents provide encouragement, to their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education?

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant for a number of reasons. With such low numbers of former foster youth pursuing a post-secondary education and even lower numbers of them actually obtaining a degree it is obvious that there are issues that need to be addressed. Former foster youth could greatly benefit from pursuing a post-secondary education for a number of reasons including job obtainment and financial security. In addition to the benefits that a post-secondary education could provide for these individuals, it could also decrease the likelihood that they will end up incarcerated, homeless, or in need of government assistance. Education has the ability to greatly improve the quality of life for former foster youth, and foster parents play a key role in encouraging these youth to pursue a post-secondary education just as any parental figure would in any youth’s life. This study not only looked at the foster parents’ perceived role in encouraging education but also the ways in which this encouragement happened.

This study is also important because it looked at the ways in which new legislation has had an impact on the foster care system as a whole. With the passing of the AB 12 legislation, there is hope that foster youth are now leaving the system more prepared for life on their own. AB 12 has the ability give foster youth more time in the system, more resources, and more support in order to be able to pursue a
secondary education successfully. This study has the potential to provide useful information to not only foster parents on the importance of encouraging a post-secondary education but also to foster agencies and the foster care system as a whole as to what training or information needs to be provided to foster parents so that they can make the biggest impact possible in a foster youth’s life.
CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

This research study was designed to explore the perceptions of foster parents when it came to their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature that has been published on topics relevant to this study. A variety of research studies and published articles have been examined and used within this chapter to either support or refute relevant topics. The topics covered within this literature review include foster youth and educational aspirations, foster youth and educational attainment, parental support, and the Fostering Connections to Success Act.

Foster Youth and Educational Aspirations

Multiple studies indicate that there is a discrepancy between the number of foster youth who have aspirations to pursue a post-secondary education and the number of foster youth who actually go on to pursue and achieve a post-secondary education. Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004) found that more than 80% of foster care youth in their Midwestern sample expressed the aspiration to obtain post-secondary education, compared to more than 70% in other national studies (Nixon & Jones, 2007). While these high percentages of foster youth expressing aspirations to further their education might suggest that this particular population is highly motivated to succeed in this arena, the numbers of former foster youth who actually end up earning
a degree are far less impressive. Only as few as 10% of former foster care youth enroll in college (Wolanin, 2005) with as little as 4% obtaining a bachelor’s degree (Nixon & Jones, 2007). There are a number of different reasons why the percentages between aspirations and actual achievements may differ for foster youth when it comes to postsecondary education. Foster youth often experience multiple disruptions when it comes to familial, academic, and social environments, which are all factors that could contribute to this disconnect.

A study conducted by Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin (2013) looked at both aspirations and expectations in terms of education for foster youth. Education aspirations have been defined as the ideal amount of education which a person would like to achieve (Reynolds & Pemberton, 2001). On the other hand, according to Kirk et al. (2013) educational expectations are a more realistic and solid prediction for future potential when compared to educational aspirations. Kirk et al. chose to look at three specific types of factors that predicted aspirations and expectations. These included demographic factors, academic factors, and social support for education. Academic factors included grade point average and academic self-perception. Social support for education was measured by parental and school staff involvement in academic assistance and discussions about college. Results of their study indicated that foster youth reported significantly lower educational aspirations as well as expectations when compared to other low income youth who were not part of the foster care system (Kirk et al. 2013). The results also pointed to academic self-perceptions and parental support as being two key factors in both educational
aspirations and expectations. When it came to both of these factors, foster youth had significantly lower scores.

In a second study by McMillen, Auslander, Elze, White, and Thompson (2003), the educational experiences and aspirations of older youth in foster care were evaluated. This particular study gathered a sample of 262 youth who lived in one suburban county and had been referred for independent-living classes. In order to be eligible to participate in this study the youth had to be between the ages of 15 and 19 and currently in out-of-home care or had lived in out-of-home placements at least one day since their 16th birthday. Researchers also chose to exclude participants if they displayed severe learning disabilities, behavioral problems (such as uncontrolled violent behavior), or emotional problems. Researchers collected data during one hour, structured, in person interviews.

Over three-quarters of the participants in McMillen et al.’s (2003) study (80%) were in high school at the time of the interview. A small percentage of participants (11%, n = 28) had dropped out of school. All of the participants except for one planned to finish high school or obtain their General Educational Development (GED) certificate. A mere 14 individuals, or 5% of participants, reported that they would be ending their education at the high school level. Of the 262 youth who participated, 70% reported that they planned to attend college and 19% planned on furthering their education beyond college. Bivariate analyses of the data revealed that those youth who expressed lower aspirations were male, younger, had more negative peers, expressed a more present rather than future orientation, were
less optimistic, and were more likely to have spent time in a psychiatric hospital or corrections facility than youth with higher aspirations. The data also revealed that neither a history of maltreatment or recent problems in school appeared to have any effect on future education plans.

**Foster Youth and Educational Attainment**

There has been a significant number of studies conducted and literature written about foster youth and their overall educational attainment. In general, these studies show that foster youth experience far less success when it comes to educational attainment in comparison to the general population of youth. These studies have looked at success in terms of a variety of different factors such as overall grade point average (GPA), repeating grades, high school graduation rates, post-secondary education attendance rates, as well as post-secondary education attainment statistics.

Blome (1997) looked at grades, and found that while youth in the general population achieved an overall mix of B’s and C’s, the foster youth population received mainly C’s. When it came to repeating a grade, foster youth were far more susceptible to having to repeat grades than the non-foster youth population; in fact, foster youth are twice as likely to repeat a grade (Burley & Halpern, 2001). In a Midwest Study of 732 foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois, researchers found that 37% of the youth in foster care reported repeating a grade compared to 22% of comparable participants from a national sample (Courtney et al., 2004).
One possible explanation for this elevated percentage of grades repeated by foster youth could be their moving from school to school. Youth who change schools often are at risk of losing credits and falling behind in school due to incomplete information and delays in transferring educational records (McMillen et al., 2003 & Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L., & Kimm, C., 2004). It is not uncommon for foster youth to move from school to school while they are also moved from home to home. It is no surprise that this shuffle amongst schools can have serious and lasting effects on a youth’s education. Mehan and Reynolds (2004) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of school mobility on reading and math achievement in the elementary grades. They found that mobility was associated with lower levels of reading and math achievement, regardless of the number of other factors included in the studies. Another study found that between 15% and 33% of the negative effects of maltreatment on children’s academic achievement was due to high rates of school transfers and residence changes (Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995). With lower grades as well as lower levels of reading and math achievement, it makes sense that a lower percentage of foster youth end up earning a high school diploma or the equivalent when compared to youth who did not spend time in the foster care system.

In order to be able to move on to enroll in college and earn a college degree, one must first make it through high school or earn the equivalent. For many foster youth, completing high school is a challenge in itself. As mentioned above, foster youth tend to earn lower grades and are at a much higher risk for repeating grades than non-foster youth which makes earning a high school diploma that much harder.
Numerous studies have found that foster youth have lower graduation rates when compared to the general population. This trend has remained consistent with time. The following is a list of high school completion rates for former foster youth by study. Festinger (1983), with a sample size of 277 in New York City, found that 65% of former foster youth completed high school. Cook, Fleishman and Grimes (1991), with a sample size of 810 in a region that covered Arizona, California, North Carolina, Illinois, Missouri, Pennsylvania, New York, and Tennessee found that 54% of former foster youth had completed high school. Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, Wyatt and Tweed (2002), with a sample size of 189 in California, found that 62% of former foster youth had completed high school.

With high school graduation rates for the foster youth population falling behind the rates for the general population, it would also make sense that this particular population would present less than impressive college attendance and completion statistics. Davis (2006) found that only 26% of individuals who had experienced foster care had completed a degree or certificate six years after beginning college, compared to 56% of students who had no experience with foster care.

**Parental Support**

The importance of a parent’s support in a child’s life is not something that can be overstated. This support is crucial when it comes to education. Studies conducted in elementary, middle, and high schools found that when parents are involved in education, students perform better on multiple indicators of educational success, including grades, test scores, school attendance, social skills and behaviors, and on-
time graduation (Catsambis, 2002; Christenson & Buerkle, 1999; Epstein, 2001). Not only is the support of parents crucial to their child’s future success but the encouragement parents provide is also something that has been looked at and found to be a very important factor in whether or not children decide to pursue a post-secondary education. According to Tierney and Auerbach (2005), parental encouragement for post-secondary education in the available literature is most commonly defined as the frequency of times during which parents discuss school matters and future college plans with their children. The same article by Tierney and Auerbach (2005) goes on to say that parental educational level, parental encouragement and parents’ educational aspirations for their children have all been consistently pointed to throughout literature as being main predictors for college enrollment.

A study conducted by Glick and White (2004) looked at a group of 8th grade students from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). The study began by interviewing a group of 8th grade students as well as their parents in 1988. Follow up interviews were then conducted in 1990, 1992, and 1994. The purpose of the study was to identify a correlation between parental behaviors and college enrollment in immigrant and native participants. The study looked at both parents’ expectations of their children when it came to education as well as parents’ involvement in their child’s education. For purposes of this study, parents’ expectations were defined as a combination of future hopes for their child, predictions of future success, and assessments of past academic performance. Parental involvement was viewed as the
number of times a parent reported that they discussed school related issues with their child.

Glick and White (2004) found that parental involvement did significantly predict educational attainment and that students who reported discussing school-related issues with their parents were more likely to have completed high school and gone on to college. When looking at parental expectations, students whose parents had higher expectations for them were more likely to complete high school and go on to college than those whose parents had lower expectations. According to Glick and White, “Overall the measures of structural background and parenting practices support the idea that families impact educational attainment not only through the provision of human capital and economic resources but also through behaviors enhancing attachment to school as well” (p. 289).

Foster youth are placed into a position where they may no longer be able to rely on their biological parents for the support they need throughout their lives. When placed into foster care, youth are forced to interact with numerous individuals including social workers, case managers, counselors, attorneys, as well as foster parents. It is a reasonable assumption to make that because foster parents are interacting with and spending the most time with these foster youth that they should take on majority of the role in providing the support and encouragement these youth need. Not much research has been conducted or written, however, when it comes to the foster parents’ role in encouraging foster youth to pursue an education or whether
or not foster parents themselves perceive this to be one of the roles they must take on when choosing to become a foster parent.

One of the few research studies that does address the role that foster parents perceive they have in foster youth’s education was conducted by Beisse and Tyre (2013). In this study, surveys were given to foster parents affiliated with a particular foster family agency. According to the researchers, “The Survey of Family Involvement in the Elementary and Middle Grades was developed to assess caregiver involvement activities, beliefs, and perceptions” (Beisse & Tyre, 2013, p. 6). The survey was used to assess a number of issues regarding foster parents and their involvement with foster youth’s educations. For example, foster parents were asked to report the frequency with which they participated in a variety of involvement activities, in addition to rating how well the child’s school and teachers communicated with them and encouraged their involvement, the extent to which they believed their child attended a good school and a school that welcomed and cared for the child, as well as the extent to which they believed that it was their responsibility to be involved in the education of children in their care.

Results of Beisse and Tyre’s (2013) study revealed a number of findings. When looking at foster parents’ involvement it was found that foster parents were, in fact, involved in their foster children’s education both at home and at school. While foster parents were reporting to be involved both at home and at school it was found that higher levels of at home involvement were reported than at school involvement. Another finding of the study was that foster parents reported strong motivational
beliefs for educational involvement. Such findings indicate that foster parents do believe that it is part of their role to be involved in the education of their foster children, and that they do believe that this involvement makes a positive impact in the lives of these youth.

**Fostering Connections to Success Act**

In 2008 the Fostering Connections to Success Act became California law. With the passing of the Act, both state and county child welfare agencies had the option of receiving Title IV-E funding (which funds foster youth in the system) for foster youth until the age of 21. Beginning in October of 2010, foster youth now had the opportunity to remain in foster care until they reached the age of 21 whereas before they were often times left to fend for themselves once reaching the age of 18. While the Act made the funding available for this extended time in the foster care system, there were certain guidelines that needed to be met if an individual were to choose to remain in the system after their 18th birthday. These guidelines included living in a supervised placement, agreeing to remain a non-minor dependent under the court, and either furthering their education in either high school or a post-secondary school, working, participating in an approved program, or being unable to do so because of medical reasons. The goal of the Act was to make the transition from foster care to independence a smoother and more successful process.

While the hope is that extending foster care until the age of 21 will positively affect the amount of former foster youth who go on to obtain a post-secondary education in California, it may be too soon to tell. With the Act taking effect in 2012,
the first group of individuals who chose to remain in the system here in California will be leaving care soon. While it may be too soon to see the affects just yet here in California, other states that extended foster care prior to California may have some telling results. For example, data from the Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth (the Midwest Study) suggested that young people may be more likely to pursue a post-secondary education if they are allowed to remain in foster care until age 21 rather than 18 (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007).

The Midwest Study is a longitudinal study that followed a sample of 732 youth from Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois as they emancipated out of foster care and transitioned to adulthood (Courtney, Dworsky, Cusick, Havlicek, Perez, & Keller, 2007). In the study initial interviews were collected when participants were ages 17 or 18, and follow-up interviews were conducted when they were ages 19, 21 and 23 or 24. Based on data collected from the participants at the age of 21, former foster youth from Illinois were nearly twice as likely to have attended college and more than twice as likely to have completed at least one year of college as those individuals in Iowa and Wisconsin. (Courtney, Dworsky, & Pollack, 2007). The difference between Illinois and Iowa and Wisconsin is the fact that in Illinois foster youth are able to remain in the foster care system until they reach the age of 21. Both Iowa and Wisconsin are more traditional in that foster youth are emancipated at the age of 18 like majority of states.
Summary

The literature indicates that there is a gap between the number of foster youth who report aspirations to pursue a post-secondary education and the number of former foster youth who actually go on to achieve a post-secondary education. The literature also reveals that in general foster youth are less likely to go on to further their education for a number of reasons when compared to the general population of non-foster youth. These findings indicate that there is some aspect of the foster care system as a whole that leaves these individuals ill prepared or unable to pursue their aspirations of obtaining a post-secondary education.

The literature also points to parental support as being a huge determining factor in an individual’s educational attainment. With foster youth in many cases being taken away from their biological parents for extended periods of time and in some cases for good it is crucial that foster parents take on the role of being the source of parental support especially when it comes to education. Unfortunately, research regarding the perceptions of foster parents when it comes to their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education is limited. Because their role is so important, it is necessary to further research on what foster parents think they can or should do to encourage foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY
Overview

For any individual who chooses to pursue a post-secondary education it is important to have a source of support, whether it is friends or family. For some even the decision to pursue post-secondary education in the first place is a decision that can be influenced by the amount of support they might have in their life. Research suggests that for foster youth, higher levels of support from foster parents can influence the decision to pursue post-secondary education (Jones, 1984). The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which foster parents encouraged foster youth to pursue post-secondary education, if in fact they did so. In addition to exploring the ways in which foster parents encouraged foster youth, this study also attempted to recognize any changes in the ways foster parents’ encouraged foster youth and the amount of encouragement provided by foster parents in regards to foster youth pursuing post-secondary education as a result of the new AB 12 legislation.

The questions guiding this research study were: (1) What do foster parents perceive as their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education? (2) What activities are foster parents engaging in with their foster youth to encourage them to pursue post-secondary education? (3) Has the passing of the AB 12 legislation impacted the amount of encouragement, or the ways in which foster
parents provide encouragement to their foster youth to pursue post-secondary education?

**Design**

Using an exploratory research design, this qualitative study used questionnaires with open ended questions to address the research questions stated above. This study was qualitative in that it intended to increase the depth of knowledge that already exists regarding foster parents and the encouragement they provide foster youth to pursue post-secondary education. The questionnaire was designed using questions previously used in interviews in a study that also looked at foster parent encouragement of foster youth pursuing post-secondary education as well as questions designed by the researcher. The questions included in the questionnaire addressed topics such as how the foster parents perceived their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education, what activities foster parents engaged in to encourage foster youth to pursue post-secondary education, foster parents’ familiarity with the AB12 Legislation, and any changes in the encouragement foster parents provided as a result of the new legislation. The strengths of the survey design was that it allowed the researcher to potentially reach larger numbers of participants as well as being more time efficient than interviews. The open ended questions also added to the strength of the survey design by allowing the participants to explain their answers to the questions in depth and in their own words.
Sampling Plan

For this study a purposive, non-probability sampling plan was utilized. A non-probability sample is one in which participants must meet certain requirements in order to be considered for participation. In a non-probability sampling plan participants all meet the same criteria instead of being chosen at random. It was expected that anywhere between five and twenty foster parents would participate in this study.

For this study the criteria that participants had to meet to be considered for participation were: a) they are licensed foster parents through a specific local foster family agency, and b) they had foster youth between the ages of 14 and 18 placed in their homes during their time as a licensed foster parent. These criteria were used in the study to ensure that all of the foster parents surveyed had gone through the same foster parent training from the same agency and were all licensed foster parents. In addition to ensuring that all the foster parents were licensed and had received the same training, the criteria ensured that the foster parents had experience with foster children of a similar age which is also an age in which encouragement for post-secondary education might begin. For the purposes of this study it would be unnecessary to survey foster parents who only took in foster children of much younger ages because encouragement to pursue post-secondary education would be somewhat irrelevant at that point in a child’s life. At age 14, the majority of individuals are either in or entering high school so it is a normal point in life to begin thinking about pursuing post-secondary education after high school.
Instrumentation

The questions used in this research study questionnaire were a combination of questions used in a previous research study done by Brayfield in 2006 as well as questions designed by the researcher. The questions included in the questionnaire were aimed at evaluating how foster parents viewed their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education as well as identifying any activities that they may have engaged in that could be viewed as encouragement. Questions were also asked to gauge the foster parents’ familiarity with the AB12 legislation and to determine if any changes in the amount of encouragement foster parents were providing their foster youth to pursue post-secondary education have resulted from the passing of this legislation. All of the questions included in the questionnaire, with the exception of one, were open-ended questions which allowed the participants to explain the answers to the questions in their own words. The one question included in the questionnaire that was not open-ended was a question that allowed the participants to rank how important they thought foster parents encouraging foster youth to pursue post-secondary education was.

Data Collection

The surveys, in addition to the informed consent, a cover letter, and an addressed and stamped return envelope, were sealed in a stamped envelope and provided to the foster agency. The foster agency then addressed and sent out the sealed envelopes to foster parents who had or have had foster youth between the ages of 14 and 18. The agency addressed the envelopes and mailed them out in order to
protect the privacy and confidentiality of their client’s information. Each questionnaire was mailed with a cover letter that discussed the purpose of the study and what the information would be used for, and a consent form. Included in the consent form was a list of all of the participant’s rights, as well as a description of the research and how the data would be collected and used. The foster parents were instructed via the cover letter to fill out the questionnaire if they were interested in participating in the study. The consent form remained with the foster parent for their own record and the returning of the questionnaire acted as their consent to participate, as stated in the consent form. Once the questionnaire was filled out, participants were instructed to return the form via mail to the researcher in a stamped and addressed envelope provided. The foster parents were instructed to return the questionnaire by a given date in order to ensure that the surveys were collected in a timely manner. In order for data to be collected and used both University Institutional Review Board (UIRB) approval and approval from the foster agency as well as consent of the foster parents who participated was obtained.

The advantages of collecting the data via mailed questionnaires included allowing the participants to fill out the information on their own time. In addition to allowing the participants to fill out the data on their own time the use of open ended questions also allowed for the data to be in the participants’ own words and for their own opinions to be freely expressed.
Data Analysis

The returned questionnaires were analyzed for themes by the researcher. The researcher collected all of the questionnaires that were returned by participants and organized the data based upon the research questions.

Protection of Human Subjects

All potential participants received a copy of the consent form in the mail. The consent form detailed the purpose of the study, the goals of the study, the rights of the participants, how the information collected would be used, how confidentiality would be addressed and maintained, as well as contact information if they were to have additional questions or concerns regarding the study. Participants were informed via the cover letter and the consent form that participation in the study was voluntary and that there would be no repercussions if they chose not to participate. It was also made clear that their participation in the study would not in any way affect their affiliation with the foster agency under which they are certified. Participants’ responses remained confidential because no identifying information was attached to their data. Upon receiving the questionnaire in the mail the researcher placed it in an envelope which was kept private and seen by the researcher only. The envelope which had the foster parents address on it and the data once it has been collected and analyzed, were shredded after completion of this study in order to protect the privacy of the participants. All key agency staff received a written description of the purpose, goals, and timeline associated with the study. The researcher did not foresee any potential harm or risks to the participants as a result of participating in this study. The
researcher also obtained the necessary UIRB approval as well as approval from the agency prior to conducting this research.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Overview

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of foster parents regarding their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. This qualitative study utilized a short survey comprised of mostly open ended questions to elicit the perceptions of foster parents. The following questions guided the study:

1. What do foster parents perceive as their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education?
2. What activities are foster parents engaging in with their foster youth to encourage them to pursue a post-secondary education?
3. Has the passing of the AB 12 legislation impacted the amount of encouragement, or the ways in which foster parents provide encouragement to their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education?

The group of foster parents who participated in this study were from a local Foster Family Agency in the Central Valley. There were a total of seven foster parents who met the criteria and agreed to participate in this research study. All of the participants were foster parents under the same Foster Family Agency, and all currently had or had in the past foster youth who were between the ages of 14 and 18. Each participant was sent an informed consent, an introduction letter, and a survey in the mail. The participants were asked to keep the informed consent for their records and return the completed survey via a stamped and addressed envelope provided to
them. No identifying information was asked of the participants so all surveys remained anonymous.

The data were collected and then analyzed for themes by the researcher. The following chapter is organized based on the three research questions that guided this study. Each section is based on one of the three research questions guiding this study and includes an analysis of the data collected for questions included on the survey relative to that particular research question.

**Foster Parents’ Perceptions of Their Role**

The first research question was intended to determine what foster parents viewed as their role in regards to encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. In an attempt to decipher whether or not the participants believed there was a difference between a biological parent’s role and his or her role as a foster parent in encouraging post-secondary education for youth, the participants where first asked about a biological parent’s role. When asked whether or not they believed it was a biological parent’s role to encourage his or her children to further their education after high school, six out of the seven foster parents’ responses indicated that they believed it was a parent’s role to encourage his or her children to further their education. One foster parent stated, “Yes, every parent wants their child to be successful and get a good job.” Another reported, “Yes, and to help pay for their education. You never stop being a parent.” A third responded by saying, “I do. It's vital for a child to know their parent believes education is important to their future.” The one participant who did not believe it was a parent’s role to encourage his or her
children to further their education after high school reported, “No, because college is not for everyone. They might want to go to work instead of going to college.”

Other questions included in the survey were aimed at gauging how the participants viewed their role as a foster parent in encouraging education. These questions included asking the participants what their role was in encouraging their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education and asking them to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 the importance of encouraging their foster youth to further their education. When asked about their role as a foster parent in encouraging their foster youth to pursue an education after high school it was clear that all of the participants agreed that they played some sort of role in this aspect of their foster youth’s lives. One participant stated, “I believe it's important for the kids to be encouraged in a direction they may not have been previously. I try to tell them how important it will be to their future.” A second participant responded by saying, “My role as a foster parent is to help them make decisions about their future, which includes higher education.” Two of the respondents reported viewing their foster youth as being their own children so they reported that their role was the same as a biological parent’s role. For example, one participant stated, “my role is to encourage my foster children who are young to go to college because I feel like I am their mother.” The one participant who reported that it was not a biological parent’s role to encourage his or her child to further his or her education after high school (stating “college is not for everyone” in an earlier question) stated “yes, it is part of a foster parent’s role, but you can’t make them go.”
The one question that was not an open ended question in the survey was a question which asked the participants to rate the importance of foster parents encouraging foster youth to pursue an education after high school. This question used a scale from 1 to 10 to gauge how important each participant viewed this type of encouragement in a foster parent and foster youth relationship. The scale was set up so that a value of one indicated no importance at all, a five indicated some importance, and a value of ten indicated extreme importance. The results of this question revealed that all of the participants placed the importance of foster parents encouraging their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education as somewhere between somewhat important and extremely important. In fact, four of the seven participants rated the importance level as a being extremely important, or rating a ten on the scale. One participant rated the importance level as a nine and another an eight out of ten. The lowest rating given by a participant on the scale was a value of seven.

**Encouragement Activities**

In addition to asking the participants to explain their role as a foster parent when it came to encouraging education and asking them to rate the importance of this type of encouragement, the survey also asked the participants to explain some of the ways in which they encouraged their foster youth when it came to education. One response by a participant to this question was, “I talk to them about grants and scholarships. I also talk to them about the new law that allows them to stay in the system and go to college.” A second participant stated that he or she, “offered to help them find grants and have even offered to help pay for college if they choose to go.”
Other responses to this question included, “I constantly talk to them about the future and give them examples from my own life,” and “I have talked to them about college, but it will be their decision.”

Not all participants in this study reported encouraging their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. One participant stated that his or her foster children were struggling to make it through high school and, therefore, would most likely not be pursuing a post-secondary education. This individual went on to say that, “I will be fine with them working which will also help them mature.” A second participant who reported not having done anything to encourage his or her foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education offered the foster child’s age as an explanation. According to this individual his or her foster child seemed too young to start encouraging him or her to make decisions regarding education after high school.

One question included in the survey was whether or not the participants thought it would be beneficial for foster agencies to offer some sort of training on how to encourage foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. Every participant surveyed indicated that he or she agreed that this sort of training, if offered, would be beneficial. Some of the responses to this question included, “Yes, because we need to know how the program works,” “Yes, because we are all here to help to the kids,” and “I'm all for training courses of all possible types.”

**The Impact of the AB 12 Legislation**

Within the survey a series of questions were asked to assess the participants’ familiarity with the AB 12 legislation and whether or not they believed that the
legislation would have an impact on a foster youth’s decision to further his or her education. In addition to assessing their familiarity with the legislation, the questions were also aimed at finding out if the legislation had any impact on the ways foster parents encouraged their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education or in the amount of encouragement the foster parents provided to their youth. When asked about their familiarity with the legislation, all of the participants except for one reported that they were familiar with the legislation. Some of the responses when asked how familiar each foster parent was with the AB 12 legislation included, “Yes. I think it is a great option for kids who are not ready to be on their own at 18,” “I have heard of the program and know it is an option when they turn 18,” and “I am learning about it because I have 2 teenage boys and I want to help them plan for the future.”

When asked to respond to whether or not the legislation had increased the amount of encouragement they provided their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education, the responses varied. About half of the participants (4 out of 7) indicated that the legislation had not affected the way they encouraged foster youth when it came to post-secondary education. One of the four participants stated, “The law hasn't changed my encouragement. It has only added to the resources I talk about being available.” The other three responses were similar in that they all mentioned that they would always support and encourage their foster youth regardless of the legislation but that the legislation had no direct effect on the way they encouraged their foster youth. The other three participants surveyed indicated that the legislation had changed the amount of encouragement they provided. One response by a participant who had
indicated that the legislation had impacted the amount of encouragement he or she provided was, “It has, because if they want to continue living in my home, they have to be in foster care and be in AB12.”

Summary

Through the use of the surveys and the responses provided by the participants, a few themes were identified by the researcher in regards to the research questions that guided this study. One of the themes identified was that most foster parents would agree that it is a parent’s role to encourage his or her children to pursue a post-secondary education after high school. In addition to agreeing that it is part of a biological parent’s role to encourage his or her children, the majority of participants also agreed that, as foster parents, part of their role was to encourage foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. It would seem as if foster parents believed that they were to take on the same role as a biological parent when it came to encouraging youth in education.

Another theme identified by the researcher was that the majority of the encouragement that takes place when it comes to encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education seems to take the form of discussions with foster youth around furthering their education. When it came to the AB 12 legislation aspect of the survey, the resonating theme was that while most of the foster parents were familiar with the legislation, only about half or slightly fewer than half had increased the amount of encouragement they provide to their foster youth regarding post-secondary education as a result of the legislation.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Overview

This qualitative study provides insight as to how foster parents perceive their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. It also provides insight as to what activities seven Central Valley foster parents engaged in as ways to encourage their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. In addition, this study describes these foster parents’ familiarity with the AB 12 legislation and ways, if any, in which this legislation has impacted the amount of encouragement they provide to their foster youth when it comes to furthering their education after high school. The participants filled out a short survey comprised of open ended questions and one scaling question. No identifying information was asked of the participants so all responses remained anonymous.

Overview of Major Findings

The first research question guiding this study involved foster parents and how they perceived their role when it came to encouraging their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. Based on the results of a study conducted by Beisse and Tyre (2013), foster parents have previously reported strong motivational beliefs for educational involvement. Such findings indicate that foster parents do believe that it is part of their role to be involved in the education of their foster children, and that they do believe that this involvement makes a positive impact in the lives of these
youth. The results of this study mirror the results of the previous study mentioned in that the majority of the foster parents surveyed reported feeling as if it was part of their role as foster parents to encourage their foster youth to further their education after high school.

The second research question guiding this study was aimed at finding out the ways that foster parents encouraged their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. Not every participant reported encouraging his or her foster youth or gave specific examples of how he or she encouraged foster youth when it came to pursuing a post-secondary education. Based on the responses of the participants who did give examples it would seem as if most of the encouragement taking place as reported by the participants was in the form of discussions around the topic of education and post-secondary education. These results are promising in that according to Glick and White (2004) parental involvement did significantly predict educational attainment and students who reported discussing school-related issues with their parents were more likely to have completed high school and gone on to college.

The final question guiding this research study involved the AB 12 legislation and whether or not it had any impact on the amount of encouragement foster parents were providing their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. Results indicated that while all of the foster parents surveyed indicated that they were familiar with the legislation, slightly less than half of the participants reported that the legislation had any effect on the amount or type of encouragement they provided to their foster youth.
**Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strengths of this research study was using qualitative methods with the use of open ended questions to comprise the survey. By using open ended questions the participants were given a chance to explain their answers to questions instead of simply answering yes or no or checking a box. Another strength of this study was the use of surveys which were sent to potential participants’ homes which allowed the participants the opportunity to fill the surveys out on their own time. The use of surveys has the potential to illicit a greater number of participants as opposed to interviews even though the final sample size in this study was small.

The limitation of this research study was the small sample size. These findings are not representative of the larger foster parent population due to the small sample size. While this study offered the opinions of a small group of foster parents, this in no way can represent the opinions of all foster parents when it comes to their role in encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education, the activities they engage in, and their familiarity with the AB 12 legislation.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings of this research also include implications for social work practice and policy. Social workers in practice need to not only encourage their foster youth clients to pursue a post-secondary education but they also need to realize the importance of encouraging the foster parents they work with to encourage their foster youth to pursue further education after high school. Because foster parents are most likely the ones spending the majority of the time with the foster youth it needs to be
emphasized that these individuals have the potential to do a great deal of encouraging and influencing when it comes to a foster youth’s decision around furthering his or her education. Foster parents would benefit from being trained in ways to encourage their foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. For example, trainings for foster parents around the topics of AB 12, scholarships and grants, post-secondary education options after high school, and ways to encourage foster youth in their education would all be great ways to get this information out to foster parents so they, in turn, could get this information out to their foster youth on a regular and consistent basis.

**Implications for Future Research**

Future research could benefit from researching the affects that the AB12 legislation has actually had on the foster youth population and their ability to further their education after high school. In addition to researching the affects that the legislation has had on the foster youth population, additional research should be done to find out if foster parents are really aware of all aspects of the legislation and how they can use this new resource as a tool to empower and motivate their foster youth when it comes to their education. It would be beneficial for future researchers to obtain larger sample sizes in order to gain a more accurate picture when it comes to foster parents and their views on encouraging foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education. Larger sample sizes could be obtained by sending surveys to or conducting interviews with foster parents affiliated with different foster family agencies.
REFERENCES
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION ENCOURAGEMENT SURVEY

In your opinion is it a parent’s role to encourage their children to further their education after high school, why or why not?

As a foster parent what do you think is your role in encouraging your foster youth to further their education after high school?

In what ways have you encouraged your foster youth to consider furthering their education after high school, if any?

Growing up, who was the individual who most encouraged you in your own education (i.e. a teacher, a parent, a friend) if anyone?
On a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being not important at all, and 10 being extremely important, how important do you think it is for a foster parent to encourage foster youth to continue their education after high school? (Circle one)

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

(Not important at all)  (Somewhat important)  (Extremely important)

How familiar are you with the AB12 legislation that allows foster youth to stay in foster care until the age of 21?

If you are familiar with the AB12 legislation, in your opinion how will this affect a foster youth’s decision to continue their education after high school?

If you are familiar with the AB12 legislation, in what ways has this changed the amount of encouragement you provide foster youth when it comes to continuing their education after high school?
In your opinion should foster care agencies provide training for foster parents on ways to encourage foster youth to continue their education after high school, why or why not?
Dear Participants,

My name is Kristen Johnson and I am currently working on my Masters in Social Work at California State University, Stanislaus. I am sending this letter out to you because I am asking for you to partake in research for my thesis. If you choose to participate in this study you will be asked to simply fill out the survey included with this letter and send it back to me in the stamped and addressed envelope provided to you. Also included with this letter and the survey is an informed consent form. Please read the consent form before filling out the survey. If after reading the consent form, you decide to participate simply fill out the survey and send it back to me. If you choose to participate the survey is the only thing that needs to be mailed back. The informed consent should remain in your possession for your records. By filling out and mailing the survey back you are agreeing to participate and your survey will be used in my research. Should you choose to not participate, feel free to discard of this letter as well as the survey, and informed consent. Your participation would be greatly appreciated. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kristen Johnson
MSW Student
APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is being done to fulfill requirements for a Master’s degree in Social Work at CSU Stanislaus. The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which foster parents encourage foster youth to pursue a post-secondary education, if, in fact, they do so. In addition to exploring the ways in which foster parents encourage foster youth, this study will also attempt to identify any changes in the ways foster parents encourage foster youth and the amount of encouragement provided by foster parents in regards to foster youth pursuing a post-secondary education as a result of the new AB 12 legislation. If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to complete the survey included and return via mail using the addressed and stamped envelope provided to you by the date indicated on the survey.

There are no known risks to you for your participation in this study. It is possible that you will not benefit directly by participating in this study. The information collected will be protected from all inappropriate disclosure under the law. All data will be kept in a secure location. No identifying information will be included on the survey so therefore all responses are anonymous and will be seen by the researcher only. Following the completion of this study all returned surveys, as well as any envelopes with names or addresses on them will be shredded.

There is no cost to you beyond the time and effort required to complete the procedure(s) described above. Your participation is voluntary. Refusal to participate in this study will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. You may withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of benefits.

If you agree to participate, please indicate this decision by returning your completed survey. For purposes of this study the informed consent form will remain with the participant for their records. The returning of the completed survey will act as your consent to participate in this study. If you have any questions about this research project please contact me, Kristen Johnson, at kjohnson27@csustan.edu or my faculty sponsor, Dr. Robin Ringstad at 209-667-3355. If you have any questions regarding your rights and participation as a research subject, please contact the Campus Compliance Officer by phone (209)667-3794 or email IRBAdmin@csustan.edu.

Sincerely,

Kristen Johnson, MSW Student