Administrators Supporting Teacher-Student Foster Youth Relationships Through Full Utilization of the LCFF & LCAP

Patricia Krcmar & Belinda Dunnick Karge

Introduction

President Obama (2016) stated,

The success of our country tomorrow depends on the well-being of our children today.... Foster youth deserve the security and strong support structures they need to achieve their dreams. (para. 1)

Educators are a vital part of the support structure necessary for foster youth to reach their dreams. To this end, definitions of multiculturalism and diversity have expanded to meet the realities of today's classrooms (Riskowski, 2010), and adding foster youth to these definitions has opened doors for funding and support.

Significant research has been conducted on the teacher–student relationship (Driscoll, Mashburn, Pianta, & Wang, 2011; Garbacz, Zychinski, Feuer, Carter, & Budd, 2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2006; Pianta, 1999; Sabol & Pianta, 2012) with these studies describing the need for positive teacher–student relationships and the impact such relationships have on the academic success of students. Yet there has been little research on how these teacher–student relationships promote the social-emotional intelligence of foster youth.

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Research has shown that teacher–student interaction (Pianta, 1999) and social-emotional intelligence (Weissberg, 2016) are critical in achieving both academic and social success. Therefore it is essential to undertake research concerning foster youth which focuses on how the teacher–student interaction plays a role in the academic and social-emotional achievement of students.

As a follow-up to Congress passing the F*ostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* in 2008 the state government in California has also been developing guidelines to protect foster children (California Department of Education, 2016). The federal legislation requires educational agencies and child welfare agencies to collaborate in concentrating on what is best for foster children. For example, the act allows students to stay at their current school during home placement changes and requires prompt school enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Furthermore, in 2013 in California, the local control funding formula (LCFF) was revised to establish allocation of new funds for foster youth to bolster academic and social achievement (California Department of Education, 2016). In addition to this change in the LCFF, education agencies are now asked to focus on foster youth.

Children living in the foster care system are faced with many different obstacles that can lead to feelings of hopelessness, anger, sadness, betrayal, and feelings of being unloved (Braxton & Krajewski-Jaime, 2011). Maslow's theory of motivation states that people have different levels of

needs (Maslow, 1943), with the most fundamental ones being esteem, friendship and love, security, and physical needs (Farmer, 2001; Maslow, 1943).

These fundamental needs must be addressed in order for children to reach the top of Maslow's pyramid of motivation (Braxton & Krajewski-Jaime, 2011; Maslow, 1943). Yet foster children have to face the reality on a daily basis that their fundamental needs may not always be met.

Earning a foster child's trust and caring are two essential things a teacher can do to help foster children (Elias, 2009). Gaining trust is a process, and it starts the first day the child walks into the classroom. Foster children have too often been surrounded by negativity, so teachers need to be positive, yet sincere (Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning, 2010). Teachers can also offer individualized tutoring to help children gain academic success. Teachers through their actions can contribute to facilitating and developing the social-emotional supports that foster children need (Neiheiser, 2015).

Background

Maslow's self-actualization theory describes not only the importance of understanding one's self but also the importance of understanding one another. These understandings are crucial for effective teaching (Farmer, 2001). Teachers who have reached this level of self-actualization will be more aware of student needs (Farmer, 2001).

Maslow's theory states that if one can accept, nurture, and care for oneself,

then in turn, one can care for, accept, and nurture others (Maslow, 1971). Therefore, when teachers have reached this level of self-actualization, they can more adequately support students academically because they are then able to look at and see the whole child (Farmer, 2001).

Through Bowlby's research, the conclusion was drawn that an infant or young child needs to experience a positive, loving, consistent, and reliable relationship with a mother or mother figure to be mentally healthy. Bowlby (1988) defined attachment in children as the need to be close to and have physical contact with a certain individual, especially in cases of being frightened or sick. Foster youth have an increased risk of not developing these appropriate mental connections due to the possible lack of a mother figure (Bowlby, 1988).

Zeanah, Berlin, and Boris (2011) proposed that attachment behaviors are characterized by a proximity need during times of stress. Bretherton (1992) argued, "in Bowlby's view, excessive separation anxiety is due to adverse family experiences—such as repeated threats of abandonment or rejection by parents" (p. 763). Through Bowlby's (1988) research, it was concluded that the definition of attachment theory includes both the physical need of attachment and the behavior it takes to achieve that need.

Bowlby (1988) stated that children who have experienced multiple adverse conditions are more likely to continue having adverse experiences. Adverse experiences that occurred in early childhood are usually independent from the child's actions, but during adolescence the experiences are usually tied directly to the child's actions.

For this reason, attachment concerns are evident in foster children. Zeanah et al. (2011) argued that foster care children have difficulties forming attachments because of the neglect they have experienced as well as being asked to form attachments with an adult they have never seen before while still trying to resolve their attachment with their biological parents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to understand how attachments, social-emotional intelligence, and teacher–student relationships intertwine to support academic and social success for foster youth. The demand for a deeper understanding of the unique needs of foster youth in education is paramount. Sabol and Pianta (2012) stated that having at least one caring adult in a child's life is essential in protecting at-risk children.

For many foster children, that one caring adult is their teacher. This study addressed the important issue of teacher–student interaction and the need for schools to support foster youth in their development of social-emotional intelligence. Social and emotional learning serves as the foundation for other learning and increases one's ability to succeed not only in school but also in life (Weissberg, 2016). This study explored how a teacher can advance foster youth's social-emotional intelligence through his or her interactions with the foster student.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the study in order to determine the impact the teacher–student relationship has on a foster youth's social-emotional intelligence:

1. How does the teacher–student relationship influence the foster youth's social-emotional intelligence?

2. How does the teacher–student relationship help foster children develop attachments?

Participants

The participants in this study came from a comprehensive Southern California school district that serves more than 55,000 students representing a diverse population, including 503 foster students (242 female and 261 male). The sample consisted of 54 foster students from a single high school, the foster parents of the students, their teachers, the school counselor, and the school site principal.

The study included a total of 15 adult participants, ranging from the site administrator, counselor, teachers, and foster parents. The school site personnel included six men and six women (50% male and 50% female). More than half were between the ages of 31 and 40 years (7 out of 12, or 58.3%), three (25%) were between the ages of 41 and 50 years, and two (16.7%) were from the ages of 51–60 years. Almost half of the participants were Caucasian (5 out of 12, or 41.7%), two (16.7%) were African American, one (8.3%) was Caucasian Portuguese, two (16.7%) were Hispanic, one (8.3%) was Mexican American, and one (8.3%) did not indicate an ethnicity.

The number of years each participant has taught ranged from four to 31, with one (8.3%) ranging from one to five years, five (41.7%) ranging from six to 10 years, five (41.7%) ranging from 11 to 15 years, zero (0%) ranging from 15 to 20 years, zero (0%) ranging from 21 to 25 years, zero (0%) ranging from 26 to 30 years, and one (8.3%) ranging from 31 to 35 years.

The foster parent participants were 100% female and each served as foster parents in their own single residential home. One participant (33.3%) was in the 31–40 age range while two participants (66.7%) did not indicate an age.

Two of the participants (66.7%) have been a foster parent between one to five years, and one participant (33.3%) has been a foster parent for 10 years. Two of the participants (66.7%) had their foster child between three to four years, and one participant (33.3%) had their foster child for one year or less.

Instrumentation and Measures

The first instrument used in this mixed method study was a custom survey, Foster Student Interaction and Social-Emotional Intelligence (FSI&SEI), created by the researcher and validated through peer review. The survey consisted of 15 questions: five demographic questions (age, gender, years of experience, grade level, and ethnicity), nine Likert-scale questions ranging from 1 (never) to 4 (always), and three open-ended questions to elicit more in-depth responses from the participants.

The survey was created to discover themes around the question, *How does the teacher–student relationship influence the foster youth's social-emotional intelligence?* Nine teachers and three foster parents completed the survey. Foster parents were asked to complete a worksheet about their foster student that consisted of three open-ended questions. Each survey was identical in content, except for the level of vocabulary and point of view (Liu, 2013).

For example, the teachers rated the statements "I have conversations with the student about academics" and "The student initiates conversations with their peers," and the parents were asked to respond to the statements "I have conversations with my foster child about academics" and "My foster child interacts with peers outside of school."

The second instrument used in the study involved face-to-face interviews with foster parents, teachers, the administrator, and the counselor. The interviews were semistructured (Creswell, 2013), which allowed themes to naturally present themselves. These consisted of 10 open-ended

questions for the parent. The researcher developed specific questions but kept them broad enough to allow themes to develop naturally.

As the interviews progressed, the questions became more focused, creating opportunities for deeper conversations (Nassrin, Soroor, & Soodabeh, 2012). The interviews were recorded using Audacity, and the researcher transcribed the interviews. Owing to the sensitive nature of the interviews, all of the recordings were deleted after the information was transcribed (Ramezankhani, Heydarabadi, Ghaffari, Mehrabi, & Kazemi, 2016). Different interview questions were developed for the several categories of participants: (a) foster parents, (b) teachers, (c) administrator, and (d) counselor. Figure 1 presents a graphic outlining the research questions and the instruments used to gather data to answer the questions.

Validity

The researcher used multiple strategies to assure validity within the study.

Triangulation of data allowed the researcher to use various forms of data to build a solid and strong theory (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). The implementation of the surveys, interviews, and journals allowed the researcher to find common categories among all three instruments. By using the three instruments, the researcher reduced the possibility of bias of any single instrument and gained a reliable and secure understanding of the research (Maxwell, 2013).

To assist in creating validity, the researcher piloted the foster parent and teacher interviews. The final study interviews then mirrored the process used in the pilot study. The interviews lasted for 35 minutes each. In addition, the researcher used member checking to ensure accuracy. After each interview, the researcher sent the transcribed interview to the participant to validate what was discussed in the interview. The researcher then asked a research expert to validate the themes found throughout the data.

Grounded Theory

The researcher used a grounded theory approach in analyzing the data. The qualitative approach focused on human interaction and multiple perspectives of the participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This method is centered on the idea that the theory develops during the study through analysis and data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Grounded theory researchers typically use interviews as the main form of data collection (Creswell, 2013). Some grounded theorists have combined qualitative and quantitative techniques to generate social theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). This approach allowed the researcher to analyze the patterns and relationships between the participants.

By constant comparisons, interpretations, and perspectives of the participants, the researcher's goal was to develop theories that were conceptually dense (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Figure 2 presents a graphic representation that identifies central phenomena. The first step taken

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Figure 1
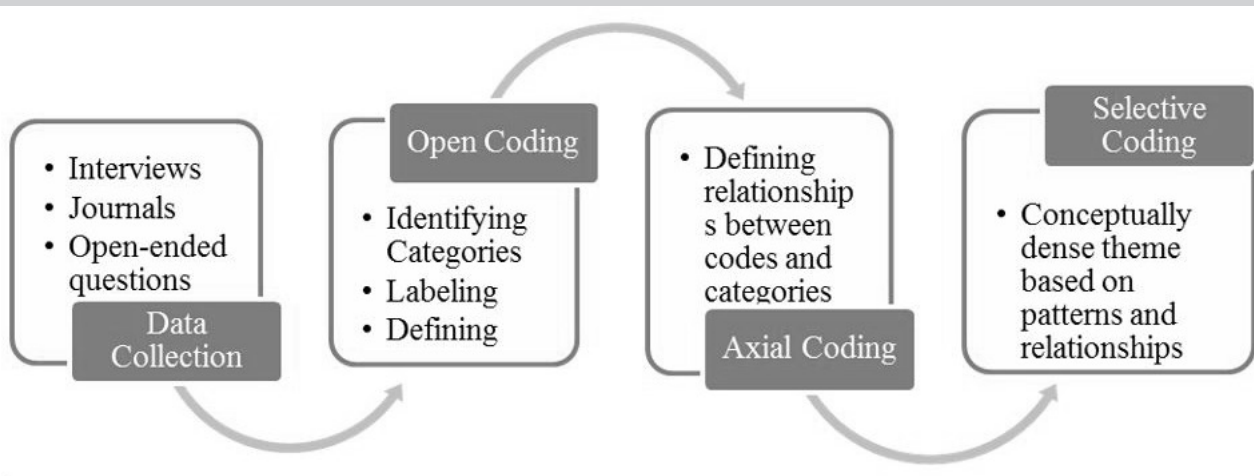*Data instrumentation (Krcmar, 2017)*

Research questions	*Instrumentation*
How does the teacher–student relationship influence the foster youth's social-emotional intelligence?	◆ Teacher survey and interview
	◆ Parent survey, worksheet, and interview
	◆ Counselor interview
How does the teacher–student relationship help foster children develop attachments?	◆ Teacher survey and interview
	◆ Parent survey and interview

Figure 2
Grounded theory framework. From Creswell (2013) and Strauss and Corbin (1994). Graphic created by Krcmar (2017)

by the researcher was to use open code while reading all of the data transcripts and open-ended questions. Through this process the preliminary and interpretive categories were determined. From there the researcher examined the preliminary codes, using axial coding, to identify relationships and determine patterns.

Examining pattern clusters led to identifying emergent themes (selection coding). The researcher used the surveys with open-ended questions as well as interview content and journals to discover themes throughout the study.

Data Collection

This mixed method quasi-experimental study used multiple forms of data collection to support the researcher's analysis of the impact that the teacher–student relationship had on the social-emotional intelligence of the foster youth. The first phase of data collection included the foster parents, foster students, and teachers receiving the FSI&ESI survey.

The second phase of data collection involved face-to-face interviews of foster parents and teachers. As part of the consent letter, parents were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. A sample of foster parents were interviewed, with the researcher interviewing each participant once. At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher gained permission to contact the participants again if further information was needed or if new questions arose.

In the teacher survey the teachers were asked if they would give consent to be interviewed. A similar sampling of teacher interviews was used to ensure validity. Teachers were asked nine open-ended questions concentrating on the teacher–student relationship. The teachers were instructed before the interview not to use the students' names.

The final phase was an interview with the counselor and administrator at the school site. The counselor and the administrator were each asked nine open-ended questions concentrating on the students' social-emotional intelligence and interactions with teachers. Throughout the data collection, the students' anonymity was protected. Figure 3 is a graphic representation of the data collection process.

Data Analysis

The quantitative focus of this study centered on the demographic data and the responses to the eight Likert-scale questions in the FSI&SEI survey. The main concepts of grounded theory were used in conducting the data analysis portion of the stu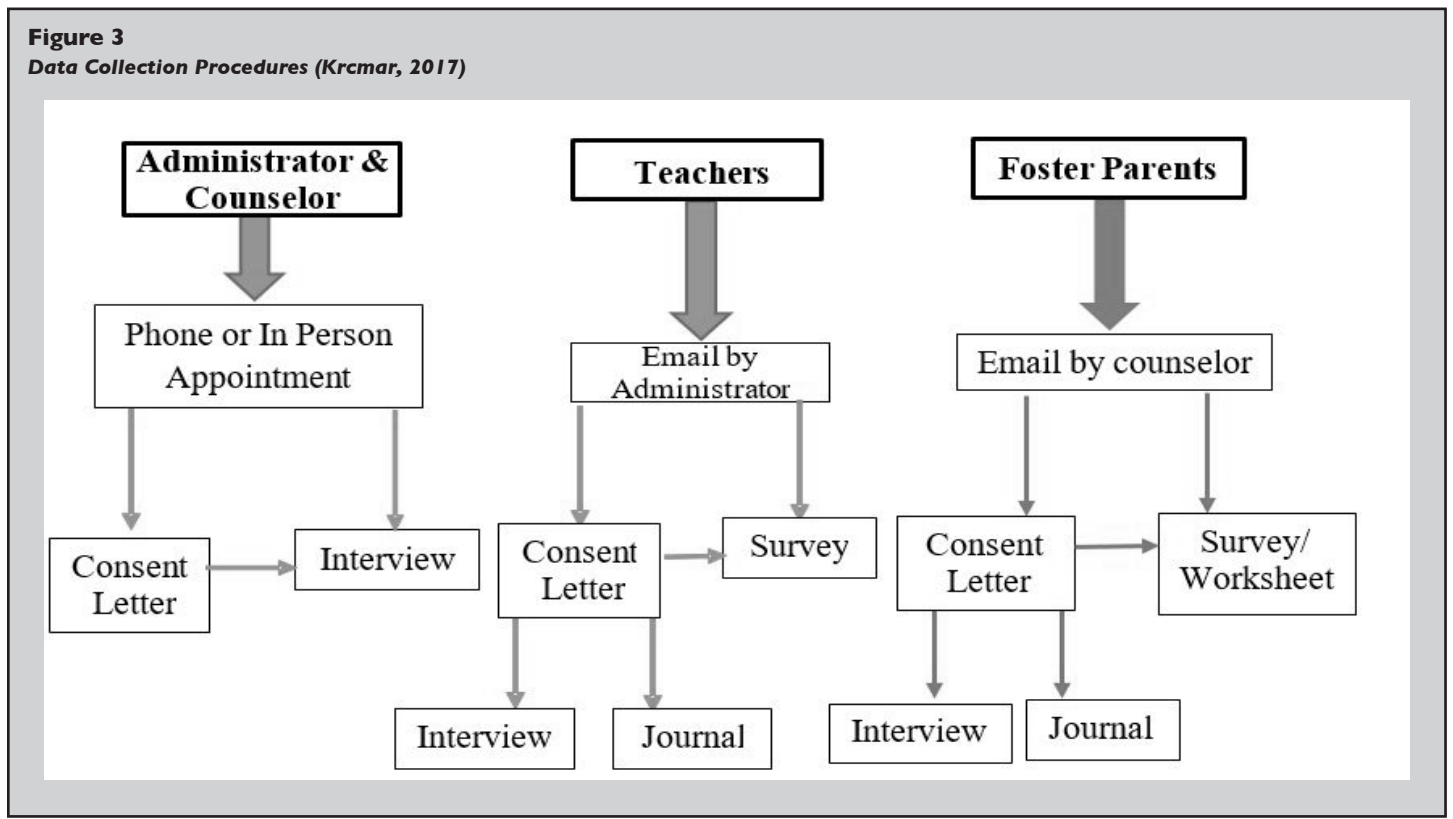dy (Creswell, 2013). Owing to the vast number of interviews, the researcher used software to record and transcribe the answers to ensure that all information was collected. The researcher began this process by using open coding of the interviews and the open-ended questions from the survey.

Open coding allowed the researcher to read what the transcripts said without reading into them (Creswell, 2013). After the open coding process was done, the researcher identified a constant category that was represented throughout all the different instruments. This category then became the central phenomenon and drove the remainder of the coding process. Axial coding was the next step, in which the researcher went back into the data and discovered categories that related to or explained the central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

The researcher began the triangulation process with the analysis of the individual interview responses from the administrator and the counselor. The foster parents and school personnel completed the FSI&SEI survey and the responses were coded. The researcher recognized patterns in the data between the Likert-scale results and the open-ended questionnaire among all the participants. The final component of the study was the interviews.

While the researcher had developed initial questions, the direction of the

Figure 3
Data Collection Procedures (Krcmar, 2017)

interviews was guided by the responses given by the participants. At the conclusion of the interviews, the researcher examined the transcripts for patterns and triangulated the findings with the open-ended questionnaire responses. The findings led to the development of the qualitative themes. A single outlier of the study was determined by the length of time the foster student lived with the family. This outlier was identified during the triangulation process. Figure 4 displays a graphic organizer of the triangulation process that was used to analyze the data gathered in the study.

Through the coding process, the following themes emerged from the interviews and open-ended questions: (a) local control and accountability plan, (b) awareness, (c) social-emotional, (d) teacher–foster student relationship, and (e) attachments.

Foster Interaction and Social-Emotional Intelligence Survey Results

A total of 12 surveys were included in the analysis: nine were completed by teachers and three were completed by foster parents. The first statement participants responded to in the survey stated "I have conversations with the student about academics." The statement was designed to gain an understanding of how the foster student interacts with adults at

a fundamental level. All participants at the school site responded with the ranking of either often or always, indicating that the foster student had a relationship with the participant.

In addition, the foster student understood who to speak to about academic concerns and who showed interest in the student's academic performance. The parents' responses to the statement were similar: 66.7% (two participants) responded that they always had conversations with their foster student, while 33.3% (one participant) seldom talked to the foster student about academics. This ranking could be due to the level of responsibility parents place on their children in high school to be in charge of their own learning.

The next statement participants responded to in the survey was "I have conversations with the student about their personal life." The purpose of this statement was to understand the depth of the relationship between the adult and the foster student and the foster student's ability to manage relationships. Relationship management refers to the ability to use personal and social awareness to interact with others effectively (Bradberry & Greaves, 2009).

Almost all of the participants responded with often or always (88.9%), indicating that the foster students trusted the adults

to share aspects of their personal lives. To have trust, one must have a positive relationship with the adult, indicating that foster students can form positive, trusting relationships given the right circumstances. The idea that foster students are communicating with adults about their personal lives indicated a knowledge and understanding of relationship management because the students could communicate their ideas and feelings effectively in an appropriate manner with an adult.

However, when foster parents completed the FSI&ESI, 66.7% (two participants) responded that they seldom had conversations with their foster children about their personal lives, while 33.3% (one participant) responded with an often ranking. These results could be due to the amount of time the foster student had lived with the parent or the amount of time spent at home versus at school.

The third statement the participants responded to was "The student initiates conversation with their peers." The purpose of this statement was to gain insight into how foster students interacted with their peers. Social and emotional intelligence are both essential to the ability for one to interact with peers.
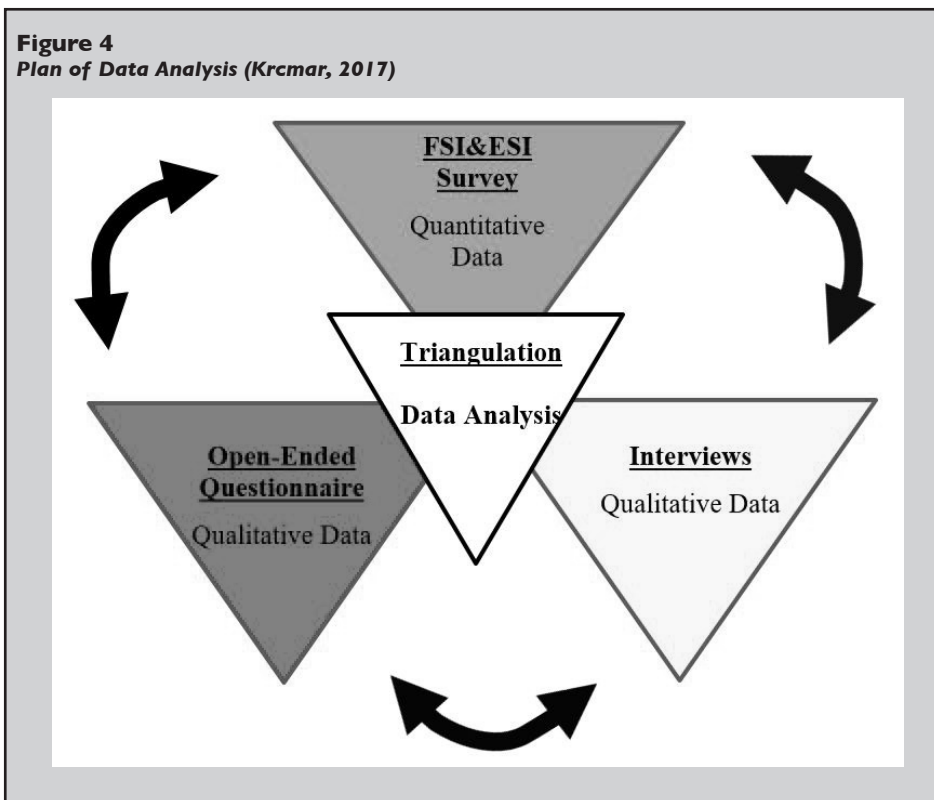
A majority of the participants (66.7%) responded with often, while three (33.7%) responded with always, and none of the participants responded with never or seldom. These results indicated that foster students were able to establish a level of relationship with peers.

However, it did not reveal the level of trust between the foster student and the peer. The foster parents were asked to respond to the statement "My student interacts with peers outside of school." A majority of the respondents (66.7%) responded always, indicating that foster students can develop friendships with their peers.

The fourth statement the participants responded to was "The student initiates conversations with me." A majority of the participants (55.6%) responded with always, and four participants (44.4%) responded with often. The foster parents responded 66.7% (2 participants) with often and 33.3% (one participant) with seldom.

These results showed that foster students were more comfortable initiating conversations with adults at the school site rather than with their peers or parents. This statement correlates with the statement that foster students talked to adults about their personal lives. Therefore the adult–student relationship was a positive and trusting relationship.

Figure 4
Plan of Data Analysis (Krcmar, 2017)

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The fifth statement the participants responded to was "The student works well with others." The respondents' answers spanned three out of the four possible rankings (22.2% seldom, 44.4% often, and 33.3% always). The variation among the answers may be due to different situations. The environment may not have been structured to allow students the opportunity to work together on a consistent basis, allowing for structures and expectations to be formed.

In addition, trust is an element that is earned, and foster students have a harder time building trust due to their background experiences. Finally, students might have faced academic obstacles that made working with others challenging and possibly embarrassing.

The sixth statement the participants responded to was "The student asks for help." The respondents' answers were evenly spread out among seldom, often, and always. The percentage of seldom responses (44.4%) was significantly higher than expected; it is important to note that the percentage of often and always responses (66.6%) represented more than half of the participants. However, the percentage of students able to initiate conversations with adults (100%) and the percentage of students who talked about their personal lives with adults (88.9%) made these responses an outlier.

The seventh statement both sets of participants responded to was "The student gets into arguments with peers." This statement was designed to test the student's social and emotional intelligence. This was the only statement where the participants responded with never. Owing to the nature of the question, a response of never (33.3% teachers and 100% parents) indicated a positive response. None of the participants responded with always, which would have been a negative response.

These results indicate that foster students were able to control their emotions and communicate effectively with their peers to avoid an argument. However, 22.2% (two participants) indicated the foster student often got into arguments with their peers; therefore some of the foster students were still developing both social and emotional intelligence skills.

The eighth statement the participants responded to was "The student is able to control their emotions." This statement allowed the researcher to understand the student's emotional intelligence. The majority of the participants and 55.6% of the teachers responded indicating often.

These results coincide with the previous statement because one would need to control one's emotions to prevent getting into an argument. Being able to control their feelings means the students had developed self-awareness and self-management skills.

The final statement the participants responded to was "The student is able to understand other people's emotions." Almost all of the participants (88.9% of the teachers) responded with often while 66.7% of the foster parents and 11.1% of the teachers responded with seldom, again indicating that the foster students had developed social-emotional intelligence on different levels.

The cumulative results of the survey indicated that the foster students had developed social-emotional intelligence. In addition, one can conclude that the students had a positive relationship with the teachers, foster parents, and their peers, but were able to communicate more effectively with the teachers rather than with their foster parents and peers.

Local Control and Accountability Plan

The initial impact of the revised LCAP triggered an effort to support foster youth in all ways—academically, behaviorally, socially, and emotionally—and to help build the self-confidence of the foster youth. The participants in our study recognized a great need at the school site after they analyzed the data and noticed that their school had the highest percentage of foster youth in the district. For example, when asked about how the LCAP impacted the school's ability to support foster youth, Participant 1 stated, "It was really almost a reminder that it was a group that we should be focusing on."

The school site leadership team realized that not only did they have the highest percentage of foster youth in the district but also the site had more than three times the number of the next closest high school. Therefore Participant 1 stated, "We should definitely do something different here. . . . We said what can we do here."

Awareness

The participants recognized throughout the study the importance of awareness: the awareness of foster student needs, the awareness of others, and their own personal awareness. By understanding these different components, the participants were able to identify and begin to meet the needs of their foster students.

Several years ago, the school site was

facing significant concerns with discipline and academic progress, so they took the time to look at the data to understand the issues. Looking at the data, they realized that foster students were the cause of the majority of the concerns. Once aware of this, the school site took steps not only to resolve the problem but also to improve the lives of the foster students. The school determined that the need was too great for a single individual to handle, so they identified people who were passionate about supporting foster students to be part of a team. When asked about the journey the school took to meet the needs of their foster youth, Participant 1 stated, "It really just became the village approach to supporting the kids."

After the participants identified the need to act and support foster students, the next step was to bring awareness to the entire school staff about the needs of foster youth. The school brought in an outside person to speak to the staff about foster youth and some of the struggles they would face in offering and providing support to foster students. If a teacher understood what it meant to be a foster child, or had a greater level of awareness of what foster students faced, or who their foster students were, it might change the way they supported or talked to their students.

When asked about the experiences at the foster youth camp, Participant 5 stated, "I guess it just built my compassion for these students and my desire to help and understand them, and help them with challenges and understand that there might be times when they are not having a good day." The participants recognized the need to know who their foster students were in their classes in order to support them.

The school determined that because of the large number of foster children in the student population, it was essential for the foster students to be aware of others like themselves. Participant 2 was asked about the intervention strategies they implemented for the foster youth and she stated, "I think the connecting piece is huge. . . . It was more just connecting them with others who were in that similar situation." Therefore two programs were created which allowed the students to become aware of other students who were similar to them, enabling them to not feel so alone.

The final piece of awareness was the recognition of one's own beliefs and knowledge about foster youth. Some of the participants made a personal connection with the foster care system because of either having family members placed in foster

care or being foster parents themselves. For example, when asked about prior knowledge of foster youth, Participant 5 stated, "My godparents were foster parents. They always had different kids that they were taking care of."

However, some of the participants in the study had no knowledge of the foster care system. For example, when asked about any knowledge or understanding of foster youth, Participant 4 stated, "From Day 1 I told them I don't know anything and I want you to teach me. And I think that built a bridge because I never acted like the expert."

The participants had noticed that the more the staff become aware, the more they saw walls come down. For example, when asked about the experiences at the foster camp, Participant 3 stated, "It was emotionally exhausting . . . some of the participants weren't as open to the stories of the children and how and why children's behavior may not have anything to do with the adult but instead has to do with the kids themselves—understanding this helps break down the walls."

Social-Emotional

The school made a constant effort to talk about the social-emotional well-being of all the students. They addressed this issue at staff meetings, leadership team meetings, and staff development days at the beginning of the year. The school also took part in book-reads to learn about how to support the whole child. When asked to describe the school's philosophy on student achievement of at-risk youth, Participant 1 stated, "Students' academics is of great importance, but also their social-emotional well-being is tied to that."

In addition, the school was intentional in providing all students with the opportunity to develop their social-emotional intelligence. All students on campus were assigned a home room that they attended once a week. During that time, they focused on social-emotional development as well as other topics that were not addressed in content classes, such as equity. Foster students were given a variety of opportunities to develop their social-emotional intelligence via camps, a UCR ropes course, and their Excel class.

Several participants described the programs as a "little family" that focused on social-emotional development during circle time. During this time, the students were able to begin to understand each other and see one another as humans and therefore develop empathy. For example,

when asked about supporting a student's social-emotional intelligence, Participant 4 stated, "Understanding them as people and humans and getting to know each other. It's funny the academics will then come because they suddenly do want to care."

Teacher–Foster Student Relationship

When asked in the survey "Would you say you have a similar relationship with the foster student as you do with your other students? Why or why not?" Participant 5 stated, "My relationship with foster students is almost always more intentional and involved." Participants indicated the need to show genuine concern for their foster students.

This concern was demonstrated in a variety of ways, from noticing different behaviors and asking questions, to calling teachers and making sure they made it to class, e-mailing teachers to check on grades, providing food, or buying lunches when the student has no money. Some of the participants portrayed the relationship with the foster student as a mother–child relationship. For example, when asked about how you show the students you care, Participant 4 stated, "It's about going out of my way . . . and they're like, 'You're like our mom.'"

Showing support was another aspect of building relationships with foster students. The participants saw a need to support foster students by attending the students' sporting events or talking with them about academics. For example, when asked in the survey to "Describe your relationship with the student," Participant 3 stated, "I hope the student knows I support them and want them to be successful."

Finally, the participants had realized that longevity plays a part in supporting foster youth. When the participants gain a reputation at the school site among the foster students as someone who has been part of either one of the programs, the more likely the students were to come to that person. For example, when asked about building a relationship with a foster student, Participant 3 stated, "I will have kids come in and I will have no idea who they are, and they will ask me for granola bars."

Attachments

The participants recognized that for students to form an attachment, there needed to be consistency in the interactions. When participants would only see a foster student once every couple of weeks,

the ability to develop an attachment was difficult. However, when participants saw foster students every week, attachments could be formed.

For foster students to know that a person would be there for them brought them comfort, according to the participants. For example, when asked about comforting the foster students, Participant 6 stated, "And reassure her that somebody was there for her and that I was not going anywhere."

Dialogues

Throughout the preceding summary, the researcher has been intentional about not including names or titles in order to ensure confidentiality. However, there were many positive takeaways from the different interviews that the researcher wanted to bring to the forefront. All statements were member checked to ensure accuracy. The researcher e-mailed the individual participants to ask permission to use their statements as well as to verify the accuracy of the transcription. All of the participants responded to the e-mail and gave consent.

An important takeaway came from the researcher's interview with the principal. The question posed to the principal was, "In what ways have you seen these programs impact your school?"

> I think more than anything is the relationship piece that you cannot measure with some of these students. You can see the examples of kids that were not interested in school and now they are. They have dreams to go to college, they are getting good grades, and they are doing so much more. I think that is what is really powerful.

A general education teacher gave a positive takeaway when asked, "How do you develop relationships with your students?"

> I hold the space. And what I mean by that is I don't assume anything, and I know that every kid that walks in has their own story and what he or she knows to be their own reality, and it's not always mine. By holding their space, I allow them to be who they are and we work on how to be a better person through that and how to use that.

Research Questions

Question 1 asked, *How does the teacher–student relationship influence the foster youth's social-emotional intelligence?* Davis (2003) has argued that teachers who understand and respond to students' needs have the chance to lay the foundation for students to learn about their social environment.

As indicated through this study, the school had made social-emotional intelligence a

priority by doing book studies, discussing it at all staff meetings, and creating classes that allow the teachers and all students to focus on aspects of social-emotional intelligence. The foster students, in addition, had programs, mentors, and the different activities hosted by the district to develop their social-emotional intelligence. The intentionality of the activities gave the foster students the opportunity to learn how to understand relationships and how to handle conflicts, which can affect not only academic achievement but also their social-emotional intelligence (Hoffman, 2009; Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012; Schonfeld et al., 2015).

We found that the majority of the foster students felt comfortable talking to teachers about their personal lives, and because they were able to communicate with the teachers, the foster students were not getting into arguments with their peers. Many of the participants spoke about the importance of taking the time to listen to their students. Mowat (2010) has stated, "The extent which young people are listened to and are enabled to communicate with a safe environment and trust is established are all key to success" (p. 176).

The influence of the foster-to-foster relationship was another component that affected the students' social-emotional intelligence. The opportunity the students had to connect with other students who had similar backgrounds and experiences allowed them the ability to process and work through obstacles with a person who understood and related. They also learned that they were human beings first and that while their background and experiences impacted who they were, it was not what defined them as a person. The school had an awareness of who the students were and what it meant to be in foster care. This allowed the school to support the foster students' social-emotional intelligence. A study conducted by Levy et al. (2014) also concluded that teachers who had identified the foster students and understood the obstacles they faced were able to support the students effectively.

Question 2 asked, *How does the teacher–student relationship help foster children develop attachments?* Hamre and Pianta (2006) have argued that even though high school students spend less time with their teachers, the relationships they develop with the adults are a vital indicator of success. As we found, foster students demonstrated a comfort level when talking to teachers about school and personal life. Through these conversations, the teachers

and mentors were able to support students in all aspects of life. Teachers were able to support and develop positive relationships because of their awareness of the obstacles or struggles these foster students face.

Because foster students have the potential to live with multiple families during any given year, the teacher may be the only constant adult in their lives (Leve et al., 2012; Pears, Kim, Buchanan, & Fisher, 2015). As stated in the interviews, the relationships with the foster students were built through the teachers listening and being physically present when needed. Mason, Hajovsky, McCune, and Turek (2017) have stated that behavioral and academic success is created by positive sustained teacher–student relationships based on a sense of belonging. As the trust builds, then the relationship is able to develop and attachments are formed. For example, one of the participant's mentees brought his girlfriend to meet his mentor, as a son would do with his mother.
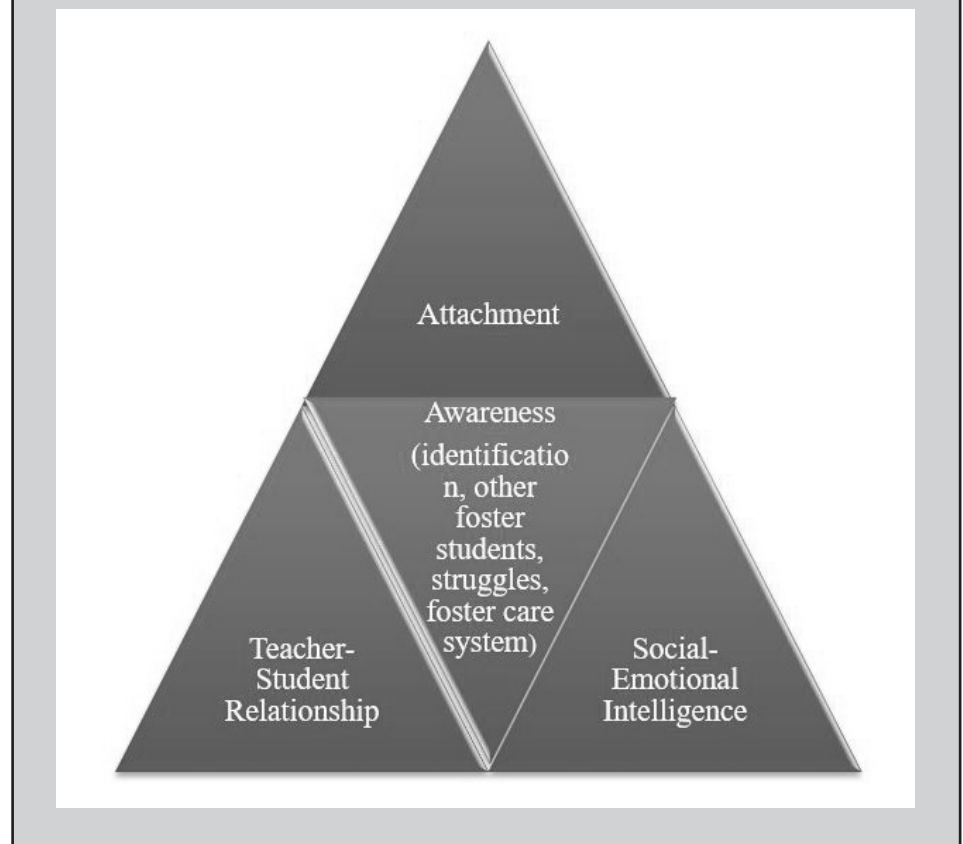
Based on the research questions, Figure 5 has been created to depict how awareness built the capacity for a foster student to develop attachments as well as develop

social-emotional intelligence. Through the analysis of the research findings, awareness became the central theme to understanding foster students. While the researcher expected that the awareness of knowing who the foster students were and the struggles they faced would play a part in supporting the foster youth, the unexpected factor that proved important was when foster students got to know other foster students.

The combination of each of these awareness factors—(a) who the foster students are, (b) struggles and obstacles foster students face, (c) one's own knowledge of foster care, and (d) other foster students—provided foster students the opportunity to develop positive teacher–student relationships, develop social-emotional intelligence, and form positive attachments.

The participants in our study were able to form positive relationships with their foster students because the school was intentional about identifying who the foster students were as well as providing insight into struggles and obstacles foster students faced. Because teachers developed this kind of awareness, they had the insight

Figure 5
Process of Supporting Foster Students (Krcmar, 2018)

to understand why a student might have his or her head down, or why the student might be acting out, or why he or she is not turning in assignments. Without such awareness, the teachers might not have understand the *why* in such situations.

Being aware of other foster students played a vital role in students developing social-emotional intelligence. The ability to connect with another student who understood all of the components of the foster care system allowed the students the opportunity to discuss their feelings in a trusting environment. Through the support of a teacher, the foster students were able to learn how to problem solve and communicate with their peers.

The final research finding concerned attachments. Teachers and educators who were aware of the foster care system and the obstacles and struggles foster students faced understood that forming attachments could be a struggle. Many of the participants spoke about the importance of being physically present for their students, forming trust and reliability, and being true to their word. As the teachers and educators developed awareness, they became intentional in how they spoke with foster students and how they interacted with them.

While all of these awareness factors played a vital part in foster students developing teacher–student relationships, social-emotional intelligence, and attachment, our research did not reveal a hierarchy among them. Rather we concluded they were equally important.

Implications
for Future Research

Supporting foster students in both academics and social-emotional intelligence is important to ensure all of the students in a school are successful. This study brought to light not only the importance of teacher–student relationships but also the significance of foster students building relationships with each other. To further support all 500 foster students involved in the study, the findings were presented to the Research and School Improvement Department and to the district Education Services Department.

With the implementation of the revised LCFF and LCAP, foster youth have become a designated population in the education system. Extra funds are now provided to the education agencies to support foster youth and their academic success. Each school district determines how the funds

will be spent based on the needs of their students. Such plans are described in the LCAP along with the cost of each intervention. The Southern California district we studied utilizes the funds to provide the foster students with experiences as well as school supplies. To further understand how to use the LCFF funds to improve academic success, additional research needs to be done to determine how different school districts distribute the funds, how the money is being spent, and how to quantify the effectiveness of current plans.

The identification of individual foster students allowed the school personnel to be intentional in their interactions and expectations of the students. While FERPA limits a district from being able to provide a detailed list of foster students to teachers, some school districts identify foster students in their LCAP. Further research needs to be conducted by the district to understand all facets of identification of the students.

In an effort to understand how to support the needs of foster youth, it is recommended that further research be done in the following areas: identification of foster youth, awareness of foster youth needs, foster parent involvement, and the distribution of LCFF funds and how the funds are utilized.

Research has identified foster students as a population that has unique behavioral, mental, physical, and social-emotional needs. However, due to FERPA, districts have not identified a legal avenue that allows them to notify their teachers who their foster students are. English language learners, special education students, and speech students are all subgroups identified as needing extra services and support from educators, and teachers are provided a list identifying the students that match one or more of the subgroups, but foster students are not on the list.

To best meet the needs of the students, we first need to identify who they are. A comparison needs to be conducted between situations in which foster students are identified, thus leading to teachers' ability to better meet the students' needs, and whether the effectiveness in meeting the needs of foster students is limited in situations where teachers are not provided a list identifying them. Foster youth identification is effective when educators know how to support the students.

Summary and Conclusion

Foster youth have attended schools for decades, but with the development of the

LCFF and LCAP, they are now a group of students receiving the publicity and acknowledgment needed to improve their academic and social success. This study brings to light the importance of awareness on multiple levels to support foster students in developing their social-emotional intelligence as well as their ability to form relationships.

School administrators should be aware of the five themes revealed in this study: (1) LCFF, (2) awareness, (3) social-emotional intelligence, (4) teacher–foster student relationships, and (5) attachments. The ability to know who your foster students are, to be aware of struggles they encounter, to be knowledgeable about the foster system, and to be aware of how a teacher can support a student is necessary in developing the teacher–student relationships that ultimately can empower a student in foster care to believe in himself or herself.

Note

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