4-3-2020

The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni's Experiences with Four-Year Post-Secondary Institutions: A Case for Capital and Field Advantage

June M. Durio
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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THE PERCEPTIONS OF FOSTER CARE ALUMNI’S EXPERIENCES WITH FOUR-YEAR POST-SECONDARY INSTITUTIONS: A CASE FOR CAPITAL AND FIELD ADVANTAGE

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The College of Human Sciences and Education

by

June M. Durio
B.S., Southern University and A&M College, 1985
M.Ed., Southern University and A&M College, 1994
May 2020
This work is dedicated to my beloved parents, Junius and Dorothy Durio, who showed me unconditional love and the value of an education and, to my sister, Patti Durio Hatch, who has stood by me throughout this journey.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of my incredible dissertation committee. Dr. Arbuthnot, thank you for not only leading as chair but for sharing your knowledge and expertise. Without you pushing and pressing me on, I don’t believe I would have been able to complete this journey. Words cannot adequately express my gratitude to you for sharing your precious time with me. Dr. Martin, thank you for spending time reading my dissertation and for the fast turnaround with your feedback. I especially want to thank you for empowering me to “just keep writing.” It has been a privilege learning from you. Dr. Poole, thank you for your willingness to serve on my committee and for helping me reach this important milestone. Dr. Benoit, thank you for serving as a Dean’s Representative and for your feedback on my dissertation as well.

I would like to acknowledge my awesome family, Patti Hatch, Kenneth Durio, Tyler Hatch, Reginald Hatch, Calvin Hatch, Nautica Hatch, and Paris Provost. I would also like to acknowledge my aunts, Joyce Hatch, Helen Williams, and Ruth Brown. For many reasons, thank you does not seem like it is enough to express how blessed I am to have you in my life! I am so grateful for your generosity, unconditional love, and your faith in me. I consider this milestone as a testament to the love we have for one another.

To my sister girls, Petra Sullivan, Erica Babino, Charlotte Bowers, Ira Brooks, and Sheila DeReoun and My Gems, Nancy Reed, Lori Gregory, Pamela Honore, and Ernestine Baskin, I would not have been able to endure all of the difficulties in my everyday life without your love, encouragement, and prayers. Thank you all for listening to me and allowing me to cry on your shoulders. Most importantly, thank you for never once doubting that I would succeed. Real friends are like rare jewels to be treasured, and you all are truly my jewels in the crown of life.
Thank you, Father Clark, my life has been profoundly changed because of your spiritual leadership and inspiring homilies. Your guidance has always given me hope and courage that all would be well. I could not have completed this work without your prayers.

To my LSU family, thank you from the bottom of my heart! You have made my Ph.D. experience one that I will always look back on fondly. I would like to give an extra special thanks and love to my doctoral cohort sister, Dr. Kemba Allen. We laughed and cried our way through this process. Thank you for not only being my cohort buddy, but for being my psychotherapist, cheerleader, and comedian. Also, I want to give a special shout out to the rest of my cohort sisters and brothers: the future Dr. Amber Smith, Dr. Veta Mitchell, and Dr. Mica Glen. I consider all of you like my new life-long friends. I am grateful for our fellowship, the study groups, and the late-night calls. Thanks to my Project Phinished group for keeping me on track and for making me accountable for my dissertation goals. I am so grateful for the many great moments we shared (bowling/golfing). Dr. Mitchell, thank you for sharing your expertise and time with the group! I am so ecstatic to say that I’m finally PHnished!

Most importantly, my gratitude and sincere thanks go out to all the participants in this study. I hope that the findings in my research will highlight your voices. I also hope the conclusions of my research will facilitate an opportunity to improve your transition into adulthood as well as improve your post-secondary education experiences. Lastly, I want to say thank you to the many foster children I had the pleasure of working with throughout my career. Thank you for providing me an opportunity to advocate on your behalf.
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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to explore, through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu’s constructs of habitus, field, and capital, the post-secondary experiences of foster youth who transitioned out of the Louisiana foster care system. Specifically, this comparable multiple case study sought out to understand how cultural, social, and financial capital influenced the post-secondary educational outcomes of foster care alumni as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation students. Seven common themes emerged from the study: predisposing factors towards post-secondary education; values, knowledge, and skills associated with post-secondary education attainment; informal and formal social networks facilitating post-secondary support; financial resources addressing post-secondary costs and concerns; gaps in college expectations and college readiness; and college as a trajectory towards better circumstances. From a deficit perspective, the research study concluded that the foster care alumni had weaker ties to various forms of capital as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation students. However, from an asset perspective, the study demonstrated that foster care alumni employed, to their advantage, the existing cultural wealth capital to successfully navigate the college system. This research study had implications for practitioners within the education and child welfare system. This research also highlighted recommendations for child welfare systems, K-16 educational systems, and independent living programs as it pertained to collaborating efforts to influence foster care alumni to pursue college degrees.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a system that espouses merit, equality, and a level playing field, but exalts those with wealth, power, and celebrity, however gained. — Derrick Bell

Ethical Ambition: Living a Life of Meaning and Worth

Background

According to the most recent report from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), there are over 400,000 foster children across the United States (AFCAR, 2017). Among those 400,000 children, there are approximately 4,461 foster children in the state of Louisiana (AFCAR, 2017). The length of time a child remains in the foster care system varies depending on whether they are reunited with their biological parents, whether they are adopted or whether they emancipate out of the system at eighteen years old. Each year, at least 20,000 youth across the United States emancipate out of the foster care system with a limited amount of social and financial support (Dworsky, 2017). In Louisiana, there were a total of 868 transitional aged foster children between the ages of sixteen and twenty in 2015 and 166 foster children who emancipated or aged out of the foster care system (Child Trends, 2017).

The amount of support that youth experience during their time in foster care and after they age out of foster care affects not only their lives, but the community’s lives as well (Schelbe, 2011). Foster children are significantly less likely to earn their GED or high school diploma, and they are often forced to return to the state’s system to rely on public assistance to help offset extreme financial hardship (Waguespack, 2013). The end result from welfare, Medicaid, incarceration, and unemployment is expected to cost US taxpayers approximately eight billion dollars for each annual cohort of youth exiting foster care (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013); the cost for Louisiana taxpayers is an average $300,000 (Waguespack, 2013).
Over the past decade, the Louisiana Department of Children Services (DCFS) has experienced ongoing structural reorganization challenges statewide due to severe budget cuts and restraints. The effects of the budget restraints have resulted in high caseloads and shortages of qualified foster parents to care for foster children (The Louisiana Legislative Auditor, 2017). The Louisiana Legislative Auditor (2017) reported that from 2012 to 2016, the number of children in the Louisiana foster care system increased by 153 (3.6%) while the number of direct care staff decreased by 12 (3.3%). Due to severe budget constraints, workforce challenges such as a shortage of staff and high turnover rates created gaps in providing comprehensive services to many Louisiana foster children in DCFS’ care (Louisiana Legislative Auditor, 2017).

Before its eradication in 2013, the Young Adult Program (YAP) provided extended case management and financial support to foster youth beyond age eighteen. In response to the elimination of YAP, a task force was established to explore strategies for assisting foster children in making a successful transition into adulthood (HCR 168 & HR 71, 2015). Considering the needs of the foster care population in Louisiana, The Task Force on Youth Aging Out of Foster Care revealed several evidence-based recommendations in its 2017 final report. Among the recommendations in the report were the need to extend foster care until twenty-one and the need to fund post-secondary education for foster youth (HCR 94, 2016).

In regard to extending foster care, Louisiana used to be one of five states that did not offer services to foster children beyond age eighteen (Kelly, 2018). On February 20, 2019, however, an assigned task force recommended that Louisiana provide intensive case management services to all foster children in its care until they reach age twenty-one years old (SCR 10, 2019). As a result of that recommendation, on June 6, 2019, the governor signed senate bill 109 that extends foster care to age twenty-one for all children identified as wards of the state.
of Louisiana. The state of Louisiana will partner with Youth Village, a nonprofit program that, in turn, awarded Louisiana a three-million-dollar grant to implement the Youth YVLifeSet model. The Youth YVLifeSet model is a “program that uses highly trained caseworkers with small caseloads to provide high-intensity services” (Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services, 2019, para. 10).

Starting in 2006, Louisiana Revised Statute 17:1687 provided tuition and fee exemptions for foster children who wanted to pursue post-secondary education (HCR 94, 2016). To this date and according to HCR 168 & HR 71 (2015), there has not been any youth to benefit from this statue because the legislation never funded the bill. Currently, the federal Chaffee ETV voucher is the only federal financial support offered to foster care alumni pursuing a post-secondary education degree in Louisiana. There are, however, a growing number of comprehensive campus-based programs across the country that supports foster care alumni with obtaining a post-secondary degree (Cohen & Kelly, 2015). In its 2015 briefing report, The Annual Louisiana Family Impact Seminar listed examples of several comprehensive campus-based initiatives that could support foster children in the state of Louisiana with obtaining a college degree (Hunter et al., 2015).

For most foster youth alumni, persevering to a college degree is a real challenge, and the risk of dropping out of college is high (Day et al., 2013). Access to minimal amounts of cultural, social, and financial support are common reasons why foster children have such dismal outcomes with post-secondary education compared to their peers who never experienced foster care (Day, 2011). Statistically speaking, an estimated 84% of foster youth aspire to attend college, but less than 3% are known to graduate from a four-year college institution, a dismal outcome for almost
Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is the most current form of capitalism worldwide (Saunders & Kolek, 2017). In broad, simple terms, neoliberalism is an economic, social, and political form of capitalism characterized explicitly as the free market (Harvey, 2005; Winslow, 2015). Neoliberal policies tend to favor the commodification of public goods, deregulation, competition, private enterprise, and individual responsibility (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal practices aim to trim down the state’s involvement with public institutions such as child welfare and education; however, defunding public institutions have resulted in drastic financial cuts and privatization of services (Harvey, 2005; Saunders, 2010). Neoliberal ideologies not only have an economic influence but social and cultural influence as well (Saunders, 2010). The neoliberal rule of thought is to assume that everyone received the same level of opportunities; therefore, if someone falls behind, the assumption is that it was his or her fault (Saunders & Kolek, 2017).

Many proponents of neoliberalism argue that the state can no longer afford the economic burdens of social welfare programs and that public service institutions would be less burdensome if they generate profit through free enterprise (Haley, 2010; Harvey, 2005; Winslow, 2015). As a result of these neoliberal social attitudes and to increase efficiency and manage cost, a growing trend of child welfare programs is to outsource services such as child placement, case management, and independent living skills training to for-profit businesses (Hubel et al., 2013). Critics of privatization in child welfare argue that services provided by the private sector are difficult to measure as well as monitor; and without careful government monitoring, some agencies, to increase profit, will reduce the cost for providing quality services to children and
families by hiring inexperienced employers and increasing caseloads (Haley, 2010; Hubel et al., 2013; Smith & Lipsky, 1992). Historically, child welfare programs have contracted with non-profit agencies to provide portions of their services (Haley, 2010; Smith & Lipsky, 1992). To compete with the private sector; however, many non-profit organizations have shifted away from a community focus service model to a business-model (Evans et al., 2005).

Another hallmark of Neoliberalism policy is the steady decline in state funding for post-secondary institutions and the steady rise in college tuition and fees (Saunders, 2007). This assault on colleges and universities has forced post-secondary institutions to shift their role as a public good and align it with the core ideas of the free market (Saunders, 2010). The neoliberal regimen perceives college students as consumers extrinsically motivated to purchase educational commodities for human capital as opposed to students engaged in civic duties and fostering a meaningful philosophy of life (Saunders, 2007; Saunders, 2010). Market-based solutions in post-secondary settings has led to “growing student debt, more students combining working and schooling, declining graduation rates for minorities and low-income students, increased reliance on adjuncts and temporary faculty, and most recently, growing interest in mass processing of students via online instruction” (Schram, 2014, p. 427). The hegemony of the neoliberal agenda ultimately creates winners and losers as each person competes in an arena that has historically served the dominant class (Apple, 2001; Saunders, 2010; Schram, 2014). The less fortunate, as a result of inequalities in the social field, are blamed for their unfavorable outcomes and perceived as a “failed market actor” (Apple, 2001; Schram, 2014, p. 431).

**Educational Challenges**

Children enter the foster care system because of physical abuse or neglect by a parent or guardian (Day, 2011). Because the foster care system is designed to be a temporary placement
for a child in its care, long-term placement in this system often results in further emotional abuse due to unstable living arrangements (Day, 2011). Individual and systemic factors such as multiple home and school changes create barriers to successful educational attainment for children aging out of the foster care system (Bruce, Naccarato, Hopson, & Morelli, 2010 as cited in Day, 2011 p. 55.). The longer a child stays in foster care, the more likely they will experience multiple foster home placements and poor academic outcomes (Day, 2011).

Dworsky and Courtney (2010) reported that children in foster care tend to change schools frequently, tend to be placed in more restrictive educational settings, tend to have high rates of school absenteeism, school instability and transience, and tend to have more inferior quality Educational Plans than children who did not experience foster care. Children who experience foster care also tend to have low scores on standardized tests, which often predates their entry into the foster care system (Foster Care to Success, 2013). Often, when a child changes school, there is a failure to transfer academic records promptly because of inadequate coordination between child welfare caseworkers and school personnel (Day, 2011). The inability to transfer academic records promptly affects academic progress for a foster child in that each time a foster child change schools, they fall farther and farther behind (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). These circumstances impede not only K-12 educational achievement but also are well-documented barriers for achieving post-secondary success (Foster Care to Success, 2013; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

Studies show that over 33% of all foster children in the United States change schools five or more times by the time they reach eighteen years old (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). A foster child loses four to six months of academic progress with each school change, and this lack of academic achievement often leads
to a disproportionate number of foster children in special education programs (National Council on Disability, 2008; Day, 2011). Numerous school changes place most foster children years behind their non-foster care peers academically (Day, 2011). Foster children who experience frequent school changes also face challenges in developing and sustaining supportive interactions with teachers and with peers (Day, 2011). Also, frequent absences from school decrease opportunities for foster children to develop friendships and to identify role models (Day, 2011; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

Multiple disruptions in home and school placements have often made post-secondary education attainment difficult for many young adults aging out of the foster care system (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Despite their ability to complete high school and enroll in a four-year college, most foster care alumni continue to face daunting obstacles that make it challenging to obtain a four-year post-secondary education degree (Day, 2011). Many foster care alumni enroll in post-secondary institutions a year or two later than their peers, or many of these former wards of the state need to take remedial classes before enrolling in college-level courses. Many foster care alumni may also need to postpone their college plans so that they can find a place to live or to seek employment (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010).

Most foster care alumni assume that they do not have enough money to pay for post-secondary educational expenses and do not pursue a four-year college degree. Those who are fortunate enough to enroll in a post-secondary institution often leave whether they graduate or not, with an excessive amount of student loan debt. Inadequate academic preparation limited financial resources, and an absence of family and peer support are barriers that many former foster youth experience when pursuing post-secondary education (Day et al., 2013; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).
The Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS)

Ellett, Ellis, and Westbrook (2007) noted that historically, the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) has been both inadequately funded and inadequately staff. According to Ellet et al. (2007), caseworkers across the nation are legally mandated to protect children who have been abused or neglected. To visit the families whom they serve, many caseworkers travel to dangerous neighborhoods where violence and substance abuse often takes place. Most caseworkers enter child welfare well intent on committing quality time to the family and children they serve, but often the stress of too little time to address an excessive number of undertakings during the day results in burn out (Ellett et al., 2007). A typical day for many child welfare caseworkers involves working with caseloads high in numbers, working with limited staff and resources, and working within a limited timeline to generate excessive amounts of paperwork.

Since the child welfare system primarily seeks to provide safety, permanency, and well-being to children in its care, post-secondary education preparation and outcomes are rarely a priority (Bruskas, 2008; Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2012; Foster Care to Success, 2013). Post-secondary educational opportunities are not the regular dialogue between an average foster child and a caseworker, particularly as it pertains to transitioning from the foster care system to college (Foster Care to Success, 2013). The foster care system, therefore, does little in preparing a foster child academically and financially for post-secondary education. “Furthermore, “helping” professionals are not the best information resources for these youth, despite their (often) good intentions” (National Council on Disability, 2008 p.13). Consequently, foster care alumni who enroll in college are continually trying to overcome hurdles such as navigating the college system, securing financial resources to pay for college, and securing safe and affordable housing.
Also, the effects of neoliberalism and state disinvestment in social programs have resulted in constant organizational challenges for the foster care system that undermines its ability to provide appropriate case management and supports to the children and families it serves. Freezes on hiring caseworkers, for example, have resulted in staff shortages, high caseloads, and high worker turnover rates. The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 2016) recommends that caseworkers have no more than 12-15 foster children on their caseload. The Louisiana Legislative Auditor (2017) noted that DCFS policy states that a caseworker carries a maximum caseload of ten children, but the average caseload that a caseworker carried in 2016, however, was sixteen. The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (2016) also noted that 68% of caseworkers in one region of the state of Louisiana had more than the recommended standard of 12-15 foster youth on their caseload. The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group (2016) also reported that two regions in the state of Louisiana had approximately 40% turnover, and five regions had over 20% turnover. Statewide, it was reported that the average turnover rates in the Louisiana child welfare system grew from 19% in 2012 to 24% in 2014 (The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2016). High caseloads, high turnover rates, and increasing administrative workloads create barriers for caseworkers to provide quality time for a foster child. These barriers not only increase the likelihood that a foster child will maintain placement in the foster care system longer than intended, but these barriers will also increase poor educational outcomes and poor financial independence outcomes for a foster child as well (The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group 2016).

The elimination of the Young Adults Program (YAP) is another example of how the state of Louisiana is disinvesting in social programs for foster children. On July 1, 2013, The Young Adults Program (YAP), run by the Department of Children and Family Services, was cut by
Governor Bobby Jindal due to state budget constraints. This program provided financial support to youth ages 18-21 who emancipated out of foster care. The financial support allowed former foster youth to either work towards a GED, a high school diploma, or a college degree. This program also provided opportunities for older foster care children who were not ready for full independence to stay in foster care while pursuing educational or vocational plans (Waguespack, 2013). The Transition Stipend Program replaced the YAP program. This program is limited in comparison to the YAP in that the Transition Stipend Program only provides monthly room and board to foster youth who will not graduate from high school until they reach nineteen years old (House Concurrent Resolution 168 & House Resolution 71, 2015).

According to Osgood, Foster, and Courtney (2010), the transition for young people who exit foster care by aging out is much more abrupt than young people who exit through reunification, adoption, or legal guardianship. The concept of independent living can be incredibly ambiguous for a foster child aging out of the foster care system as the focus on establishing permanent connections to others shifts abruptly to self-sufficiency (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Preparing foster youth for successful adult outcomes has not always been a priority of the foster care system (Mallon, 1998; Larimore, 2012) but over the past three decades, federal policies such as the Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (CFCIP) have significantly increased the availability of independent living programs to older youth aging out of the foster care system (McDaniel et al., 2014).

The policy goal of Independent Living programs is to increase support and to facilitate life skills services that will assist youth with transitioning out of the foster care system. However, there continue to be gaps in providing the most effective interventions to adequately produce positive outcomes for youth exiting out of the foster care system (Courtney et al., 2017).
Research shows that the average youth in the United States is generally not self-sufficient until they reach twenty-six years old (Larimore, 2012; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Many researchers have questioned the effectiveness of Independent Living Programs due to the high rates of homelessness, incarceration, and unemployment outcomes among foster care alumni (Courtney et al., 2017; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Larimore, 2012; Propp et al., 2003; Shirk & Strangler, 2004). Table 1 presents current data compiled by Child Trends (2017) on common independent living services provided to foster children in Louisiana in 2015.

Table 1. Independent Living Services Provided to Transition-Age Foster Youth in Louisiana in 2015

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Most commonly received services by youth in LA</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
<th>Least commonly received services by youth in LA</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent living needs assessment</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>Post-secondary education support</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health education and risk prevention</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>Supervised independent living</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Budget and financial management</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Other financial assistance</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The National Youth in Transition Database (NYTD) as reported by Child Trends (2017)

According to Unrau, Hamilton, and Putney (2010), the insufficient services provided by the foster care system create structures of oppression and mistreatment for many foster children based on the child’s dependency on the state. Cunningham and Diversi (2012) claimed that too many youths “aging out” of foster care transition into adulthood with many barriers preventing
them from achieving sufficient adult independence. Many foster children’s experiences in foster care have created a number of developmental issues, such as learning disabilities and mental health disorders (Day, 2011). These customs and practices created by the foster care system have resulted in a gap between overall higher education expectations and a foster youth’s academic, social and financial preparedness for college (Unrau et al., 2010).

**Overview of Policies Impacting Post-Secondary Outcomes for Youth Aging Out of Foster Care in the State of Louisiana**

Today, there are federal and state policies to help relieve former foster children from the challenges of independent living and post-secondary educational attainment. Implementation of these policies varies from state to state (Cohn & Kelly, 2015). The Foster Care Independence Act, for example, established the Chafee Foster Care Independent Living Program (CFCIP) in 1999. This program is the most significant source of federal funding used to prepare foster children with transitioning out of foster care into adulthood (Dworsky, 2017). The services include education, training, employment, and financial support. States can also spend up to 30% of CFCIP funds on room and board for foster care alumni.

In 2001, the Foster Care Independence Act added the Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program in 2001. The ETV voucher is the first federal program that targeted the post-secondary needs of current and former wards of the state (Day, 2011). This Act provides financial aid for post-secondary education and training. “States can use these funds to provide foster youth with up to $5,000 for their college education. Youth can remain a part of the program until the age of 23, given that they are making significant progress towards completing their program” (Cohn & Kelly, 2015, pg. 7). Even though these previously mentioned federal and state programs help provide financial resources housing and post-secondary education
support to foster care alumni, Cohn and Kelly (2015) noted that more is needed to provide complete coverage of living expenses, housing, books, and other necessary expenditures for foster youth.

The most significant challenge for foster care youth transitioning from foster care to college is the lack of social and financial support. A study conducted by a Florida college system, for example, revealed that its campus had 80 former foster care/homeless youth enrolled at their university, and nearly a third of these students were on academic probation in the fall of 2014 (Ellis, 2015). Having nowhere to stay, leaves young foster care youth with very few housing options that include moving in with unsafe family members, living with friends, or begging former foster parents to allow them to live in their homes until the semester begins (Hunter et al., 2015).

Since many foster care alumni lack a reliable support system of adults, gaining information on how to navigate the bureaucracies of the university system is challenging (Dworsky, 2017). Parents in the United States typically support their children with food, shelter, financial assistance, and guidance way beyond the age of eighteen. However, this is not the tradition for youth who are wards of the state (Schelbe, 2011). A longitudinal study conducted by the University of Chicago showed that when foster care is extended beyond eighteenth years old, post-secondary retention among foster care alumni is more likely (Courtney et al., 2010). The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (FCA) of 2008 allows states the option to extend foster care to age 21, along with continued permanency planning to youth who meet specific education, training, or work requirements. States can claim federal reimbursement for the costs of caring for and supervising Title IV-E eligible foster youth until their 21st birthday. Currently, 25 states have adopted this act (Wiltz, 2017). The Task Force on Youth
Aging Out of Foster Care revealed a prevalence of homelessness among foster children in the State of Louisiana and recommended in its 2017 final report that foster care in Louisiana be extended to age twenty-one (House Concurrent Resolution 168 & House Resolution 71, 2015).

Throughout the years, several U.S. states have developed student support programs on their college campuses to meet the specific needs of foster care alumni. Although their models are different, the common thread is that each program includes a collaboration of institution and community-based support. According to Emerson and Bassett (2010), the mission of these tailor-designed student support programs is to increase persistence, retention, and graduation rates for foster care alumni. Most of these student support models are grounded in the framework of the Guardian Scholars Program. Each student support program has a designated leader who networks with other college offices and communities to assure that foster care alumni are identified and receiving the resources necessary to increase successful post-secondary outcomes (Emerson & Bassett, 2010). Appendix B shows the states that offer a comprehensive four-year college program for former foster children.

**Statement of the Problem: An Uneven Playing Field**

America has an extensive history of providing post-secondary education access to privileged cultures – that is, “the group that controls the economic, social and political resources” (Mills & Gale, 2007, p. 4). After the civil war, policies such as the Land Grant Act, Brown v. Board of Education, and the GI Bill increased access to higher education for underprivileged groups, minorities, and women (Eckel & King, 2004). Nevertheless, in the 21st century, post-secondary education in America seems to have come full circle, from ideologies relating to “the public good,” back to an era when laws constrained education for certain groups of people due to class-based inequalities. This shift in ideologies has caused many low-income, poor Americans
to struggle with post-secondary education attainment, especially in a time of a growing global market and neoliberalism (Hunt et al., 2006; Martinez & Garcia, 1997).

Foster care alumni, in particular, have the lowest graduation rates from four-year post-secondary institutions out of any other subgroup of underprivileged youth. Also, they are less likely to enroll in college and, if enrolled, less likely to graduate from college as compared to their non-foster care peers (Dworsky, 2017). Foster youths in many states are required to exit the foster care system when they reach 18 years old. Because neoliberal ideologies perceive foster children as financially independent at 18, market-driven solutions to the social problems of foster youth alumni create many systematic barriers for obtaining a post-secondary degree (Schelbe, 2011). These barriers are typically a result of systematic inadequacies to maintain resources and critical social networks. Problematic social issues of emancipated foster children examined only through the lens of neoliberal ideology, limits ways of resolving these issues to just market-driven strategies. Market-driven solutions ultimately lead to holding these former wards of the state accountable for poor post-secondary outcomes when these results, for the most part, are generally beyond their control (Martinez & Garcia, 1997; Schelbe, 2011).

*A Cultural Resemblance: First-Generation Students*

Similar to foster care alumni, first-generation students lack insufficient levels of social and cultural capital to navigate the college system successfully (Sullivan-Vance, 2018). First-generation students and foster care alumni generally come from low-income families, attend poorly performing K-12 schools, and are less academically and financially prepared for college. Both also lack the appropriate guidance when preparing for and navigating post-secondary education (Okumu, 2014). As a result, foster care alumni and low-income first-generation students typically do not take college preparatory courses in high school due to scoring low on
Math and English standardized tests (Cortney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Many foster care alumni and first-generation students take remedial courses during their first year of college (Day et al., 2013). Taking remedial college courses is problematic because research shows that within the first year of college enrollment, these underserved groups of students drop out of college within their first year of registration (Day et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2012). Overall, common barriers that first-generation students and foster care alumni experience when pursuing a post-secondary degree include a lack of college preparedness, lack of financial support, and lack of social support when transitioning from high school to college.

Foster care alumni, however, differ from a low-income first-generation student in that first-generation students have families to turn to whereas foster care alumni do not. Although limited as compared to traditional middle-income students, low-income first-generation students also have more social and financial capital than foster care alumni. Because of their similarities, many post-secondary institutions view foster care alumni as a sub-population of first-generation students and fail to recognize the unique needs of students who were wards of the state (Day et al., 2013; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Emerson, 2006; Okumu, 2014).

**Capital Over Merit: Field Advantage and Continuing-Education Students**

In a market-driven society, middle-class parents are very skilled at using their cultural, social, and economic capital to seek out the best educational opportunities for their children (Apple, 2001). According to Thompson (2015), cultural capital provides middle-class parents with the ability to give their children an advantage within the education system in three ways. Firstly, middle-class parents tend to be more educated than low-income parents and are in a better position to help their children with homework. Secondly, middle-class parents are skilled
at researching educational resources. Thirdly, middle-class parents tend to stress the importance of deferred gratification to their children. Lastly, middle-class parents typically take advantage of their social capital to give their children an advantage in education by consulting with other parents whose children attend the best school and by knowing professionals employed at the best schools (Thompson, 2015).

Reay (2004a) claimed that the education system has come to a point and time where middle-class parents appear to have taken on a role as co-educator. As they draw on their cultural and economic capital, middle-class parents are often empowered to create a range of strategies so that they can intervene in their children’s educational outcomes. The process of “exiting,” for example, is one strategy that middle-class parents use to get around from enrolling their child in a failing state school. Parents who have enough financial capital move to communities where schools are considered desirable. Middle-class parents, who rely mainly on their cultural capital, typically engage in the process of enrolling their children in selective schools (Reay, 2004a).

A longitudinal study regarding middle-class children and educational success noted that many middle-class parents were taking advantage of special education resources as a strategy for increasing their child’s ability to compete in the college admission process. These parents, according to Demerath, Lynch, Milner, Peters, and Davidson (2010), were reported to have had manipulated special education policies by having their child classified as “other health impaired” on an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The IEP provided specific accommodations to the students, such as extra time on standardized tests. Providing additional time on standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT gave the student an advantage when engaging in the college admission process (Demerath et al., 2010).
Many middle-class parents can use their economic, social, and cultural resources with a variety of strategies to enhance their children’s ability to succeed in schools. In contrast to low-income populations, middle-class parents can afford to drive their children across town to the better schools and can provide their children with cultural resources such as dance, music, or camps (Apple, 2001). As a result of their cultural capital, the self-confidence of middle-class parents typically results in effective communication with a teacher, especially when disagreements surface between home and school (Reay, 2004a).

Middle-class students are also more likely to have parents who have graduated from college as compared to marginalized students. Continuing-generation students are typically raised in homes with high levels of social, cultural, and financial capital, and typically view college enrollment as an expectation of their parents. Not going to college, therefore, is usually not an option. Students whose parents graduated from college have advantages in that their parents can help them navigate the college system through their experiences, their connections, and their financial support (Sullivan-Vance, 2018).

Purpose of the Study

Pierre Bourdieu (1984), a renowned French philosopher and sociologist, argued that meritocracy is an illusion grounded in the ideology of dominant groups and that the field of education is an arena in which social inequalities are reproduced because of unequal distributions of economic, social, and cultural resources among privilege and marginalized groups. Bourdieu further claimed that the social inequalities linked to higher education often reproduces and legitimizes social hierarchies due to granting more access to privileged cultures because of their inherited capital, not because of talent and hard work (Mills et al., 2007).
The body of scholarly research literature that currently exists suggests that foster care alumni often struggle with four-year post-secondary success because of class-based inequalities (Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014). This research study provides critical insight into the challenges and the successes that foster care alumni encounter during their pursuit of a four-year college degree as compared to non-marginalized groups.

**Definition of Terms**

**Agency** - is defined as “the organization responsible for providing services while a child or youth is in foster care. Agencies may have names such as CPS, DHS, or CFS and may be run by the county, state, or by a private organization” (FosterClub, 2017a).

**Aging-Out** - is defined as when a youth emancipates or leaves foster care because they turn a certain age, such as 18 or 21 (depending on the laws of the state they live in). Aging out usually results in loss of support from the State for things such as foster care payments, housing, living costs, and health services (FosterClub, 2017a, p.1).

**Chaffee** - is defined as an abbreviation for the Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, named after John H. Chafee, the U.S. Senator responsible for introducing legislation that offers assistance to help current and former youth in foster care achieve self-sufficiency. The legislation provides funds for Independent Living Programs and Education and Training Vouchers for higher education (FosterClub, 2017a, p.1).

**Foster Care** - is defined as a Foster care is a system by which adults care for minor children who are not able to live with their biological parents. When parents are unable, unwilling, or unfit to care for a child, the child must find a new home. In some cases, there is little or no chance a child can return to their parents’ custody, so they need a new permanent home. In other situations, children only need a temporary home until their parents’
situation changes. In any case, the children need somewhere to stay until a permanent home is possible. Foster care is intended to be a temporary living situation for children (FosterClub, 2017b, p. 1).

Foster Care Alumni/Former “Ward of the State” - Terms that “are used interchangeably, and refer to a student who was in the custody of the State rather than in a biological parents’ home at the time of graduation from high school/application to college” (Day, 2011, p.135).

The Significance of the Study

There is a dearth of research regarding foster care alumni pursuing a four-year post-secondary education in the state of Louisiana. One goal of this research study is to contribute and expand scholarly knowledge towards the existing literature on the foster care population in conjunction with four-year post-secondary education. The goal is also to broaden the understanding of child welfare workers, educators, and legislators on how to best support the needs of Louisiana’s foster children who are pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree through policy and practices.

This research study will have potential implications for child welfare workers, foster parents, researchers, counselors, teachers, higher education administrators, judges, taxpayers, and legislators. The usefulness of this study is relevant because it will give a voice to the four-year post-secondary experiences of students who grew up in the foster care system. Most importantly, this research study will help inform policies to include better resources that will level the field of higher education for foster care alumni by taking away many of the barriers preventing post-secondary success.
Theoretical Framework

Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu, a French socialist and philosopher, provided a relevant theoretical framework for understanding why some people enroll and persist in four-year college institutions and why some do not (Burnell, 2015). According to Bourdieu (1977), the education system devalues marginalized groups by reproducing the injustices of the world and he “demonstrates how education perpetuates inequality and lack of opportunity” (Burnell, 2015, pg. 93). In this respect, Bourdieu’s theory of practice has played a considerable role during the twenty-first century in providing insight into how the school system reproduces injustices by allowing particular groups of people to succeed based on the cultural, social, and economic ties they have access to (Mills & Trevor, 2007).

Bourdieu’s theory of practice underscores a series of interrelated terms field, habitus, and capital (Greenfell, 2012). These concepts help explain how social and class inequalities among various cultures are reproduced. Bourdieu’s epistemology takes the approach of social constructivism in which his theory of practice transcends the dualisms of structure and agency as well as objectivity and subjectivity. Bourdieu wanted scholars to consider his interrelated concepts as thinking tools because of the dualities in their work (Dalal, 2016).

The Concept of Habitus

Pierre Bourdieu (1977) argued that social inequalities repetitively reproduced interactions with agency and structure. These culturally and symbolically underpinnings lead to reinforcing what Bourdieu coined as habitus. Bourdieu defined habitus as:

- a system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without
presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them (Bourdieu, as cited in Swartz, 1997, p. 100).

Habitus, therefore, is a person’s worldview that is acquired from family during childhood and from education (K-12 and post-secondary). Habitus shapes perceptions and attitudes and is different with each social class. Habitus also structures a person’s thoughts and actions in subconscious ways.

For this reason, people tend to perceive opportunities and aspirations based on the circumstances of their habitus (Reay, 2004a). In this context, post-secondary education is more likely to be thought of as easily obtainable for members of privileged groups rather than for members of marginalized groups (Maynor, 2011; Walther, 2014). The habitus of parents with higher levels of education and wealth, for example, may perceive post-secondary education as necessary for acquiring human capital. The college enrollment rates for children of these parents are likely to be higher than for children whose parents do not possess the same habitus (Jez, 2014).

The Concept of Field

A field is a space for social interaction. It is a “microcosm in which the agents and institutions are integrated and interact with each other in accordance with field-specific rules” (Walther, 2014, pg.8). A field is recognized by “the rule of the game,” a concept known as Doxa (Leander, 2010). Doxa, coined by Bourdieu, indicates that each field possesses its own formal and informal rules for interacting, for making choices, and for securing positions within a field. Bourdieu argued that agents conform to these rules without realizing it (Roth, 2002). Doxa also provides an agent with a sense of what is possible or what is not within each field, which, as a result, it generates its values (Reay, 2004b).
Fields generate their values because the rules are exclusive to their distinct social spaces (Leander, 2010; Bathmaker, 2015; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). However, economics and politics typically embed social spaces, which make it a hierarchal structure in nature (Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). How an agent ranks in this hierarchy depends on field-specific resources that Bourdieu identified as capital. The more capital an agent has in the field, the more social mobility he or she will obtain. In this regard, the higher education field tends structure as a hierarchy of “haves” and “have-nots” where marginalized students (such as foster care alumni) struggle for resources to maximize their position in the college arena (Maton, 2005). This ongoing struggle often leads to low college retention rates and, ultimately, reduced post-secondary graduation rates among marginalized groups - specifically foster care alumni (Maton, 2005; Walther, 2014).

The Concept of Capital

Bourdieu identified three, valued resources in a field. These are resources that agents typically struggle to obtain to improve their position in a field. Bourdieu coined these resources as capital. Capital is significant in providing life opportunities to agents. Capital typically presents itself in three ways: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital.

Economic Capital

Economic capital is convertible to money. Economic capital is a family’s total wealth and assets (what you have). Economic capital quickly reproduces culture and social capital (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Walther, 2014).
**Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is knowledge and skills inherited from family, social groups, and education (what you know) (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Walther, 2014). Cultural capital varies among social classes.

**Social Capital**

Social capital is a network of relationships that provide information on resources and knowledge (who you know) (Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Walther, 2014). Social capital is a popular theoretical framework used in the social sciences and is used among education researchers and policymakers to improve post-secondary institutions (Sullivan, 2002). Social capital can convert into economic and cultural capital. There are many definitions of social capital, and they are interchangeably used when referencing Pierre Bourdieu.

Table 2 is a summary of Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts and how his concepts relate to former foster children in conjunction with four-year post-secondary education.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bourdieusian Constructs</th>
<th>Summary of Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Habitus is a person’s built-in, subconscious worldview based on how they were raised (i.e., social class, education). People tend to perceive opportunities and aspirations based on the circumstances of their habitus.</td>
<td>The habitus for many long-term foster children typically aligns with disruptive social networks because of their complex histories of abuse and neglect. As a result, most foster children with this type of history are more likely not to receive practical information about college enrollment. This type of disposition is generally not helpful for navigating the college system. As a result, many foster children often perceive college as unattainable.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field</td>
<td>A field is a space for social interaction. Bourdieu compared the social interaction within a field to a “well-regulated game.” How an agent obtains social mobility within a field will rely largely on how prepared an agent is willing to follow the rules of the field, on how the agent’s habitus is aligned and on how much field-specific resources the agent possesses. Agents struggle to either maintain or transform their status position in the field (Leander, 2010; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004).</td>
<td>The field of post-secondary education generally requires passing entrance exams, paying for living and college expenses, and passing course work the rule of access. The rules of the game within the post-secondary education structure often place many former foster children at a significant field disadvantage because many foster care alumni lag behind their non-foster care peers academically due to multiple school enrollments. Also, many foster care alumni need to work full-time jobs to supplement their alumni drop out of school to pursue employment versus post-secondary education.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bourdieusian Constructs</td>
<td>Summary of Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Capital</td>
<td>Field-specific resources.</td>
<td>Foster children have economic capital that is controlled by the state that has custody of them (Corwin, 2008). Typically, foster care alumni receive financial aid (PELL) and Chafee funds (ETV vouchers) when enrolled in college. However, the total combined is not enough financial resources for tuition, room and board, books, and living expenses. Foster care alumni typically obtain their cultural capital from the courts and the foster care system (Corwin, 2008).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Three types:</td>
<td>1. Cultural</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2. Economic</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. Social</td>
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**Critical Perspectives of Bourdieu’s Theory**

Critics such as Mills (2006) asserted that Bourdieu’s theory is pessimistic and deterministic because there is an unconscious disposition for marginalized groups to accept the power of the dominant class. The theory, according to many critics, does not give enough credit to those marginalized individuals who want to change their status in a prospective field. Mills (2008) and Reay (2004b) asserted, however, that many critics misinterpret Bourdieu’s framework. Both researchers argued that transformation is not excluded from Bourdieu’s theory and opposed criticism from researchers by bringing attention to Bourdieu’s recent work that demonstrates misalignment and tension between habitus and field. According to Reay (2004b), Bourdieu’s *The Weight of the World*, described a significant amount of striving, resistance, and action aimed at changing current circumstances by many poor and dispossessed.

Many scholars have criticized Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital, claiming that Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is vague and is not as precise in meaning as compared to his
theories of social and economic capital (Kingston, 2001; Reay, 2004a; Sullivan, 2002). Yosso (2005) argued that many scholars perceive cultural knowledge of privileged groups as the most valuable and that this perception, reinforces *deficit thinking* to explain poor educational and social outcomes of the oppressed. Kingston (2001) argued that highbrow cultural activities such as going to art museums and the theater are not exclusive only to privileged groups but are also enjoyed by marginalized groups. Brar (2016) argued that Bourdieu undermines his concept of cultural arbitrariness because terms such as highbrow and lowbrow are absolute and claimed that these terms suggest the superiority of one form of cultural capital over the other. To avoid misinterpretation of a deficit model for those who do not participate in what some consider to be highbrow culture, scholars were encouraged to use relational terms such as “minimally valued,” “moderately valued,” and “maximally valued” to reveal a range of cultural capital valued in a particular field (Brar, 2016). Sablan and Tierney (2014) also encouraged researchers to go beyond employing cultural capital as a deficit model and explore cultural capital in ways that do not reproduce social inequalities.

Critics also argue that because Bourdieu’s theory originated from French society, his theoretical approach is not universal to American culture (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007). Despite what critics identify as limitations to Bourdieu’s theory of *social reproduction*, scholars from across the nation continue to use his analytical tools to understand the relationship between power and capital. It the researcher’s opinion, that scholars can apply Bourdieu’s theory to almost any circumstance. Bourdieu’s theory of practice, therefore, is used in this study as a framework to explore the post-secondary outcomes of foster care alumni.
Chapter Summary

Foster children are leaving foster care unprepared for adulthood and are vulnerable to the issues of unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration. A vast majority of foster children aspire to pursue a four-year post-secondary education. However, many do not enroll in college. The focus of this research study is to explore the four-year post-secondary experiences of three categories of students.

This chapter introduced the research problem, research purpose, the theoretical framework, and the significance of this research study. Chapter two includes a literature review surrounding the conceptual framework of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it pertains to foster children and four-year post-secondary education. Chapter three includes qualitative methods and procedures and a more in-depth discussion regarding the reasoning for the research study’s design. Chapter four explores the findings and will describe the foster care alumni, first-generation, and continuing-generation experiences with four-year post-secondary education. Finally, chapter five includes the conclusion and recommendations, provides implications for further research, policies and practices, and a final reflection. The next chapter reviews extant literature that supports this current research study.
CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

I think I was the only one that they raved about. I applied to like ten colleges. I got accepted to seven. They raved that you are a youth that stood out – she is resilient. I did not get that resilience from DCFS or extended support like I wanted to.

— Reyah, research participant

Interview with June Durio, Louisiana State University PhD Candidate

According to many researchers, foster care alumni face daunting obstacles that affect retention and graduation outcomes when pursuing four-year post-secondary education (Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2013; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Although an estimated 84% of foster care youth aspire to attend college, less than ten percent graduate from a four-year college (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014).

This chapter begins with a summary of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. The second part of the literature review explores previous research about Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field, and capital and how his theory of social reproduction impacts the perceived four-year post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni as compared to first-generation college students and continuing-generation college students. The literature in this review is relevant to the posed research questions and provides context and understanding about the retention and completion outcomes of college students who experienced foster care.

The literature review concludes with an examination of scholars who expanded the works of Pierre Bourdieu by providing a broader view of his concept capital. These models can potentially explain how some foster care alumni successfully navigate the four-year post-secondary system when the research indicates that many foster care alumni have dismal post-secondary graduation rates. Also, the models can potentially have policy implications for foster children who want to pursue a four-year post-secondary degree.
Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Social Reproduction

Pierre Bourdieu (1930-2002) is one of the most prominent philosophers, anthropologists, and sociologists of the twentieth-first century. Many scholars in the educational, economic, and political fields apply his intellectual work to their research. In his formative years, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Claude Levi-Strauss influenced Bourdieu’s work (Greenfell, 2012). As a philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu sought to answer questions about the nature of mind, agency, and personhood. He approached these philosophical questions through methods adapted from anthropology and sociology (Roth, 2000).

Throughout his research, Bourdieu argued that an unequal distribution of power and domination of resources generates an inherited socially constructed reality where the socially constructed actions of the inherited produce a “natural” reality in society and, therefore, cultivates a “taken-for-granted” order (Walther, 2014). According to Roth (2000), Bourdieu claimed that social life is a constant struggle as agents compete within a social structure for resources and continuously seek to change their position among social classes. He compared a social life to a “well-regulated game,” where what determines an agent’s position of power is the actual “feel for the rules of the game.” The people who create the rules for the game (the inherited) understand them well and apply them correctly (Roth, 2000).

According to Bourdieu (1972), the game is complicated because the players in the game are not cognizant of how the game organizes and how the game “systematically” yields different results for different people (Roth, 2000). Bourdieu claimed that both privileged and marginalized groups are unaware that the rules of the game work in favor of the dominant group—that is, the group with the most cultural, economic, and social resources. As a result, the organization of the game continually reproduces privileges to those players with the most capital and continually
functions as a method to reproduce inequalities among lower classes of people. Those who thrive in the game perceive success as “natural,” and those who do not thrive in the game perceive failure as a lack of motivation or skill (Roth, 2000).

The interaction between habitus, field, and capital produces the logic of Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice; therefore, it is difficult to explain one concept without explaining the other (Reay, 2004b). Habitus, field, and capital are elements in Bourdieu’s theory of practice that could apply to almost any circumstance (Walther, 2014). Regarding capital, Bourdieu argued that the success of a social agent depends on the amount of capital that they own. Economic capital is money and financial assets, cultural capital is knowledge and skills, symbolic capital is prestige and status, and social capital is information and social resources (Fox, 2014). Capital transmits from parents to children. Children can inherit their parent’s money, house, knowledge, or social skills (Roth, 2000).

Habitus is an extension of culture and is a complex principle of everyday experiences where choices range on a continuum of possibilities; on one end of the continuum, possibilities are endless, and on the other end, possibilities are few (Reay, 2004b). Dispositions are reproduced based on the type of field encountered (Reay, 2004b). Depending on the habitus and how attitudes play out in the daily interactions of privileged or marginalized groups, the framework surrounding an agent’s external and internal circumstances are bounded by choices that either produces opportunities or constrain them (Reay, 2004b).

Fields vary in nature and can take on many forms, such as education fields, child welfare fields, market fields, economic fields, political fields, and much more. Fields are autonomous from each other in that they each have their unique rules for behavior (Naidoo, 2005; Maton, 2005). Also, fields have a “take it for granted understanding” called Doxa. Fields are hierarchal
in that there is a constant struggle in each field to establish a position for dominance and power (Leander, 2010). Bourdieu’s asserted that social agents occupy space in the field based on the number of resources they possess (Naidoo, 2004). How the agent perceives their position in the field and how they utilize the field depends on the level of resources (capital) they have. When habitus comes across a familiar social space, it is like a “fish in water,” meaning the social agent does not feel the “weight of the water” and, therefore, takes the daily interactions within the arena for granted (Dalal, 2016).

Following the concept of doxa is the notion of symbolic violence, which is central to understanding the social reproduction process. Symbolic violence is a hidden form of domination perceived as “the natural order of things” and is grounded in misrecognition (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 168). Pierre Bourdieu (1977) asserted that symbolic violence happens when doxa distributes or maintains unequal amounts of capital within a social field. Misrecognition occurs when violence is recognized but not perceived as such (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 168). The symbolic violence associated with neoliberal dominance and self-responsibility, for example, often leads disadvantaged groups to blame themselves for their unfavorable circumstances while the dominant group’s agenda to maintain unequal distributions of capital stays hidden (Bourdieu et al., 2012).

Each year at least 20,000 youth exit out of the foster care system, and for many, a college degree is just as important to them as it is for their peers who did not grow up in foster care (Dworsky, 2017). A college degree is one way to end a cycle of poverty for foster care alumni by increasing employment opportunities and by increasing economic mobility (Foster Care to Success, 2013). To capture the experiences of former foster children with four-year post-secondary education, the research study relied upon Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus,
and capital. There are a vast number of articles and empirical research studies investigating Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, habitus, and capital in the higher education arena. The research literature contained in this chapter examined the contributing factors to the retention and graduation rates for both marginalized and privileged students attending four-year post-secondary institutions.

**Pierre Bourdieu’s Thinking Tools and Post-Secondary Education Research from Foster Care to College: Barriers Navigating the Post-Secondary Education Field**

A central piece of Bourdieu’s theory is the concept of the field and the notion of autonomy (Maton, 2005). Fields vary according to the types of resources valued and according to the relative degree of autonomy from other fields, specifically the fields of economics and politics (Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). The field is a social space where social agents with different expectations and dispositions interact. A competitive ball game between agents is commonly used to describe the social interactions within the field where each arena generates its own rules and social norms (Leander, 2010). The agent obtains varying degrees of advantages and possibilities within the field as they struggle to conserve or transform his or her position based on their inherited resources (Dalal, 2016: Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). Unequal distribution of resources within the field determines the structure within the field that ultimately positions each participating agent in a hierarchy of haves and have not’s (Maton, 2005).

Within the field of higher education, the rules for accessing knowledge and obtaining degrees has led to a significant gap in college degree attainment between foster care alumni and young adults who did not grow up in the foster care system (Dworsky, 2017). The gap that many foster care children experience while growing up in foster care is primarily attributed to systemic and individual barriers (Bruce et al., 2010 as cited in Day, 2011 p. 55.). As a result, a vast
number of research studies suggest that foster care alumni hold a disadvantage in the field of higher education as compared to their non-foster care peers (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Courtney et al. (2010) conducted one of the most comprehensive longitudinal studies on adult functioning outcomes of former foster children ages 23 and 24 years old (Okpyh & Courtney, 2014). In regard to higher education, Courtney et al. (2010), found that forty percent of the Midwest participants in their study completed one year of postsecondary education as compared to fifty-three percent of a national sample of 23 and 24-year-old youths. The researchers also found that eight percent of the Midwest participants completed either a two or four-year postsecondary degree as compared to thirty percent of the same national sample (Courtney et al., 2010). The data in Courtney et al. (2010) showed that thirty-one percent of the Midwest participants enrolled in college reported taking remedial classes. Nearly two-thirds of the participants enrolled in postsecondary education at the time of the Midwest study received student loans. Half of the students who were no longer enrolled in school at the time of the study, reported having student loan debt that they would not be able to pay off anytime soon (Courtney et al., 2010).

Overall, Courtney et al. (2010) found that the significant barriers for former foster children pursuing a higher education degree were financial resources, needing full-time employment, needing to support children and family, and needing transportation. The Midwest study concluded that the participants from Illinois who opted to stay in foster care until twenty-one had better postsecondary outcomes than the foster youth who exited out of the foster care system at eighteen (Courtney et al. (2010)).
Through a literature review, Dworsky and Perez (2010) identified six barriers that placed former foster children at a disadvantage when pursuing a post-secondary degree: 1) the child welfare system does little to encourage foster children to pursue a college degree (Merdinger et al., 2005 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010), 2) many foster children are not college ready and may need to take remedial courses during their first year in college (Emerson, 2006 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010), 3) many foster children lack appropriate independent living skills and cannot rely on parents for emotional support (Courtney et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010), 4) many foster children lack knowledge about the financial aid available to them (Emerson, 2006 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010), 5) many foster children present behavioral and mental health issues that sometimes interfere with their ability to succeed in college (Courtney et al., 2005 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010), and 6) colleges and universities implement services and resources that typically address low-income first generation students and do not address the unique needs of foster children transitioning out of foster care (Emerson, 2006 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

Using a sample of 23 to 24-year-old foster youth from the fourth wave of the Midwest study, Dworsky and Courtney (2010) identified post-secondary educational barriers as 1) disruptions in elementary and secondary education, 2) lack of affordable housing, and 3) limitation of Chafee ETV funds and state tuition waivers. Also, the study supported the claim that foster youth are more likely to enroll in college when they are allowed to remain in foster care until they are 21 years old. As a result of remaining in foster care until 21, the researchers demonstrated that participants who had completed at least one year of post-secondary education increased from “29.6% (n=175) at age 21 to 37.4% (n = 225) at age 23 or 24. However, only
6.2% (n = 37) of the 23- or 24-year-olds had graduated from college with either an associate’s or a bachelor’s degree” (p. 3).

When examining the factors that influenced the post-secondary educational pathways for former foster children, Rios and Rocco (2014) identified two themes – “academic barriers” and “academic supports.” A sample of twenty-four college foster care alumni perceived “non-empathetic teachers” and “administrators,” “lack of academic rigor,” “uninformed caseworkers,” and “low-quality foster care placements” as primary obstacles to academic achievement. On the other hand, participants in the study perceived caring teachers, helpful counselors, and a challenging academic environment as positive academic supports (Rios & Rocco, 2014). Rios and Rocco (2014) claimed that foster care alumni do not take the same linear path to a college degree as their non-foster care peers because they lacked academic support while in the foster care system.

Most colleges and universities implement programs to serve first-generation, low-income students (Okumu, 2014). Similar to first-generation students, foster care alumni receive very little guidance in preparing to navigate the post-secondary education system (Okumu, 2014). Both groups do not take college preparatory courses in high school due to low scores on high school math and English standardized test (Courtney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Many foster care alumni and first-generation students take remedial classes during their first year of college (Day et al., 2013). In their study, Day et al. (2013) argued that taking remedial college courses within the first year of college is problematic because underserved students drop out of college within their first year of enrollment.

Because most college administrators who implement support programs perceive foster care alumni as a subclass of first-generation students, they often fail to see the unique challenges
of foster care alumni transitioning to college (Day et al., 2013). Day et al. (2013), for example, applied survival analysis to examine longitudinal data from a Midwestern university while comparing the post-secondary outcomes of foster care alumni and first-generation students. Day et al. (2013) found that students who had been in foster care graduated at slower rates than low-income, first-generation students. Also, the study found that students who had been in foster care struggled with completing a college degree despite good academic standing.

Day et al. (2011) also compared post-secondary outcomes of foster care alumni to low-income first-generation students enrolled in four-year colleges. While controlling for race and gender, the researchers demonstrated that foster care alumni were more likely than first-generation students to drop out of college before the first year of their enrollment ended (21% to 13%). The researchers also concluded that foster care alumni were more likely than first-generation students to drop out of college before degree completion (34% to 18%).

Lastly, in a descriptive study portraying foster youth’s college readiness, Unrau et al. (2012) administered a College Student Inventory to 81 former foster youth identified as college freshmen. The study revealed that foster care alumni were more likely to drop courses in their first year of college than first-generation students without foster care experience. The results of the inventory also indicated that in comparison to their non-foster care peers, foster care alumni were less receptive to receive career counseling, had less family support, and performed poorly academically during their first year in college.

Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction theory evolved during an era when a social compact between universities, the state, and society protected the field of higher education from marketization (Naidoo, 2004). At that time, a high degree of autonomy hallmarkmed the field of higher education (Bathmaker, 2015). With the global marketization of the
university, the infringement of heteronomous principles drawn from the economic and political fields have eroded the autonomy of higher education over the past two decades (Colley, 2014; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004; Naidoo et al., 2011). The impact of heteronomy in the past two decades has resulted in a rapid expansion and diversification of post-secondary institutions within the higher education field: two-year community colleges, four-year public institutions, four-year private institutions, and for-profit institutions (Eckel & King, 2004; Bathmaker, 2015; Naidoo, 2005; Maton, 2005; Tsiplakides, 2018). With the expansion of higher education within just one Bourdieusian field, there has been a growing increase in social stratification across the different types of post-secondary institutions due to competition to recruit the best students (Bathmaker, 2015; Tsiplakides, 2018). As a result, research shows that privileged students are more likely to attend more selected colleges, and disadvantaged students are more likely to attend community college (Tsiplakides, 2018).

Many researchers who have employed Bourdieu’s theory in the past often question if his field theory has maintained its relevance as it relates to market-related trends and expansion changes within the field of higher education (Bathmaker, 2015; Naidoo, 2004). Although Bourdieu has modified his theory over time to address power struggles and heteronomy within the education field, some critics suggest that Bourdieu’s theory continues to need revisions to aid in understanding current post-secondary education issues (Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). For example, some critics argue that Bourdieu’s theory does not consider that heteronomy just may be beneficial for non-traditional students (Bathmaker, 2015). Additionally, critics argue that Bourdieu’s tools do not consider ways in how internal actions of the higher education field may produce values associated with moral satisfaction, self-esteem, personal development, and social interaction (Bathmaker, 2015 p. 73; Maton, 2005).
Reproduction to Transformation: The Concept of Habitus

One primary argument from critics of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory is that habitus is deterministic and does not leave room for change (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Mills, 2008a; Reay, 2004b). According to Bourdieu’s theory, working-class people do not possess the same habitus as middle-class people when it comes to higher education (Burnell, 2015). The reason why is because the social structures of marginalized groups tend to recreate circumstances where they are destined to think and act in ways that place them at a disadvantage (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014). Because of the differences in habitus, marginalized groups are least likely to enroll in post-secondary education (Burnell, 2015). Bourdieu conceded that one way that a person can change the trajectory of his or her life is through the thoughts and actions of self-reflection; however, these circumstances are rare (Smith, 2017).

Being placed in foster care is typically considered an unfortunate life circumstance, and as a result, many former foster children believe they are perceived as criminals, teen mothers, and drug users due to their history with the court, social workers and foster parents; resulting in the future of foster children often viewed by most as limited (Smith, 2017). Consequently, foster children are at risk for internalizing the perceived low expectations of them, and this could limit the possibilities of their life circumstances (Hines et al., 2005).

Mills (2008a) claimed that education plays a critical role in shaping the habitus of marginalized students. Based on how they perceived themselves or how their teachers or peers perceived them, marginalized students have the potential to develop either a reproductive habitus or a transformative habitus (Mills, 2008a). According to Mills (2008a), a reproductive habitus is one that “recognizes the constraints of social conditions and tend to read the future that fits them” (Mill, 2008a, p.100). The natural way of behaving for someone with a reproductive
habitus includes “feeling the burden of their circumstance” and “reading the future that fits them.” A reproductive habitus can produce feelings of hopelessness and, as a result, reduce aspirations and goals (Mills, 2008a). In contrast, a transformative habitus invites agency and creates alternatives for poor social conditions that are not immediately apparent (Mills, 2008a). A transformative habitus is one that “recognizes the capacity for improvisation and tends to generate opportunities for action in the social field” (Mills, 2008a, p.7).

Burnell (2015) argued that sometimes when social agents are offered opportunities and taken out of their natural social fields, habitus can transform. When a habitus changes, the transformed habitus can reproduce. Burnell (2015) demonstrated that when a social agent comes across an unfamiliar habitus, it does not have to result in a “clash and conflict” crisis. Using Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical framework to guide his qualitative study, Burnell (2015), examined the experiences and perspectives of ten, non-traditional, higher education students. Widening the participation policies in higher education provided the participants from working-class backgrounds with an opportunity to enroll in college. Although several participants described experiences related to feeling like a “fish out of water,” many also stated they wanted to graduate so they could set an example for their children. Changing the structure of habitus is an example of not only social agents being free to make their own choice but also an example of social agents obtaining resources to change their position in a variety of fields (Burnell, 2015).

Drawing on the notion of agency and self-efficacy, Hitlin and Johnson (2015) explored how optimism impacts a social agent’s future expectations and life outcomes. Using data from the Youth Development Study, the researchers employed a multi-dimensional model of agency to assess perceived self-efficacy and life expectations. The researchers implied that agency is an individually developed resource involving perceived capacities/resources and belief about
perceived capacities/life chances; therefore, people are not just merely unconscious carriers of their habitus, but rather people capable of appraising their life circumstances with positive future assessments and self-reflection as well. The researchers concluded that a sense of optimism could transcend certain aspects of a worldview for predicting future expectations about life circumstances (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015).

Hines et al. (2005) and Okumu (2014) also found that foster children could construct conscious decisions to change adverse life circumstances. During in-depth interviews with a sample of fourteen former foster youth attending college, participants in the Hines et al. 2005 study reported that internal factors such as “assertiveness, independence, goal orientation, persistence, the determination to be different from abusive adults, the ability to accept help, a flexible and adaptable self-image, and the ability to make conscious changes were characteristics for successful post-secondary educational outcomes” (Hines et al., 2005, p. 391).

Smith (2017), sought out to understand how former foster children critically perceived their aspirations and future possibilities. Building upon Hitlin and Johnson (2015), the qualitative study found that engaging former children in individual biographies, cultural notions of morality, and imagination, deviated foster care alumni from their past experiences. The study also found that envisioning imaginative possibilities as a form of cultural capital influenced the foster care alumni’s post-secondary aspirations, increased optimism, and broadened a subjective sense of agency. Exposing former wards of the states to alternative worldviews and participating in a college support program influenced post-secondary aspirations as well (Smith, 2017).

Okumu (2014) explored college transition meaning-making dynamics of foster care alumni and the role that colleges and universities played in shaping foster care alumni’s experiences. Even though themes of isolation and abandonment were present due to students
perceiving inadequate support from both the foster care system and the college campus, Okumu (2014) found that the participants in the study interpreted their college experience as empowering, optimistic and hopeful. Also, the students conceptualized their transition to college as an opportunity for a preferred identity and a new sense of direction (Okumu, 2014).

**A Case for Leveling the Field: The Concept of Capital**

Obtaining a college degree has the potential to accumulate capital and is often needed to earn economic and social mobility (Jez, 2014). According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural, social, and economic capitals are interrelated as well as interdependent (Fox, 2016). It is possible, therefore, for one form of capital to convert into another form of capital (Reay, 2004a).

**Cultural Capital**

College students generally enter the field of higher education with access to varying degrees of capital. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds have an advantage in that they can use their economic and cultural capital as a tool to successfully gain entrance and to navigate the higher education system where students from lower socio-economic backgrounds cannot (Hawthorn, 2014). Pierre Bourdieu asserted that because cultural capital functions as a way to reproduce inequalities in education, the education system appears to favor and reward the dominant culture’s norms with more social mobility within its setting (Dalal, 2016; Mills & Gayle, 2007). Inequalities are reproduced when the education system values the cultural capital of the middle and upper class as the norm and when the educational system expects every student to function as if they have access to the same resources as the dominant class (Bourdieu, 1977).

Many former foster children enter the college system at a disadvantage because they lack “knowledge, skills, and insider ways of being and doing” (Sullivan-Vance, 2018, p. 58). According to Bourdieu (1977), upper-middle-class college students enter the field of higher
education with an understanding of the rules of the game (doxa). Upper-middle-class college students understand the rules of the game for the field of post-secondary education because their parents were more likely to have attended college before them and are more likely to help them navigate the college system. Goldthorpe (2007), on the other hand, argued that with successful navigation of the college system, cultural capital does not necessarily have to transmit exclusively within the homes of biological families but can also independently transmit from settings such as schools, foster homes and social media (Brar, 2016).

While examining the gap between educational aspirations and attainment for youth in foster care, Kirk, Lewis, Nilsen, and Colvin (2013) suggested that foster parents without a college degree, may not encourage or prioritize post-secondary education; therefore, post-secondary education expectations and involvement for foster children in their care may be low. Lastly, Unrau et al. (2012) claimed that foster children often lack social support regarding post-secondary education because their caseworkers and other professional advocates standing in for them do not focus on preparing this population for college.

Financial Capital

Research shows that underrepresented students such as foster care alumni and first-generation students tend to be less informed about how to obtain financial aid and student loans than continuing-generation students (Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005; Furquim et al., 2017). Furquim et al. (2017), found that first-generation and low-income students were more likely to take out student loans and more likely to incur higher student loan debt than their non-first-generation peers. Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, and Ditzfeld (2017) argued that students from both low socioeconomic backgrounds and first-generation students frequently spend a significant amount of time working to supplement college expenses. The time spent working takes time away from
studying as well as time away with engaging peers. Lastly, the first-generation student is more likely to assume the financial responsibility of their post-secondary education than continuing-generation students (Aspelmeier, 2012).

**Social Capital**

Child welfare policies within a neoliberal framework typically create conflict with social work values among child welfare caseworkers (Garrett, 2010). Drawing upon reflections originating from Pierre Bourdieu, Garrett (2010) claimed that working in a neoliberal context often produces tension among caseworkers within the child welfare field because they follow two masters: those whom they want to help (foster children) and the administrators who create the bureaucratic practices for the state. Research shows that the child welfare system typically views a successful outcome for young adults exiting out of the foster care system as someone who can maintain employment, safe housing, and who can no longer be costly to the state (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Although these outcomes appear successful on the surface, Propp et al. (2003) argued that social connections are essentials for foster youth transitioning out of foster care to adult independence. If not included, a caseworker does not have a successful independent living case plan.

To highlight child welfare and the tension surrounding independent living, many researchers have identified the unique challenges a youth experiences after aging out of the foster care system (Courtney et al., 2010; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Propp et al., 2003; Rios & Rocco, 2014). As several researchers have pointed out, once it becomes apparent that a foster child will not return to their biological family and that another family will not adopt them, a case plan is developed to transition a foster child to adult independent living (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Case plans that do
not include social networks, however, would most likely place a foster youth exiting out of foster care at risk for inner feelings such as loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

In a narrative ethnography study conducted by Cunningham and Diversi (2013), a sample of six youth aging out of the foster care described an abrupt transition to adulthood that placed a high priority on independence. The study indicated that the participants were not prepared for independent living as the narratives highlighted economic and employment challenges, difficulty connecting with others, housing instability, a loss of social support, and pressure to be self-reliant. The purpose of the qualitative study was to advance the narrative of foster children and to provide insight to child welfare professionals so that they could better understand what aging out of the foster care system was like for foster children.

In an article examining self-sufficiency among foster care alumni, Propp et al. (2003) argued that case plans are often developed based on tangible, measurable, and successful outcomes. The research concluded with the authors proposing that rather than focusing on independence, child welfare practices should reshape their practices to include an empowerment model that focuses on the values of interdependence, connection, and collaboration for young adults transitioning out of the foster care system (Propp et al., 2003).

Merdinger et al. (2005) examined the experiences and successes of foster care alumni students attending four-year post-secondary education institutions and characterized their resilience during times of adversity (The Pathway to College Study). Foster care alumni who participated in the study identified a stable high school placement, a challenging high school curriculum, and participating in high school extracurricular activities as factors that contributed to their resilience and persistence through college. Also, an “abundance of social support and
participation in pro-social organizations and groups” (p.893) manufactured resiliency for foster
care youth when coping with adversities such as financial and emotional challenges while in
college as well. The study also demonstrated that information about financial aid was beneficial,
as well. Overall, foster care alumni identified social support as the most important external factor
associated with successful post-secondary outcomes.

**Foster Care Alumni College Support Programs**

Kuh (2007) argued that first-year college students in the United States expect to perform
much better with college reading, writing, and studying than they generally do. This mismatch
between the expectations of the post-secondary setting and the reality of the student’s academic
performance often leaves underrepresented students less prepared to navigate the college system
successfully, and often impacts their decision whether to persist in their major field of study or
college overall (Kuh, Gonyea & Williams, 2005a). Kuh et al. (2005b)
(Kuh et al., 2005b) suggested that to increase post-secondary success; post-secondary institutions
need to examine the pre-college experiences and dispositions of students who are least likely to
participate in programs that promote student success and post-secondary institutions also need to
explore ways to encourage student engagement in formal and informal activities as well.

Watt, Norton, and Jones, (2013), developed supportive campus programs that included a
mentoring component for emancipated foster care students. The supportive programs developed
a "strength" framework to encourage resiliency from foster care alumni. The researchers engaged
in a three-year case study to explore if they would receive positive enthusiasm regarding the
student support programs. Within three years, the researchers discovered that students benefitted
from the student support programs by evidence of increased recruiting and retention rates of
foster care alumni. Also, the researchers discovered that the strength framework affected foster
care alumni in three domains: 1) redefining identities, 2) respecting autonomy, and 3) utilizing assets. Many of the foster care alumni involved in the study struggled academically and struggled with life choices. The participants indicated that the social support programs, paired with a "strength" framework, were encouraging in that this program had the potential to change the way they viewed themselves and the potential to change how society viewed them as well.

Several U.S. states have developed comprehensive planning and cross-system collaboration programs that provide more guidance and financial support to former foster youth while obtaining college degrees (Foster Care to Success, 2013; Wiltz, 2017). The Seita Scholars Program at West Michigan University provides financial aid as well as academic support such as coaching, work-study, and career mentoring to former foster youth in their state. The New Yorkers for Children Guardian Scholars Program (NYFC), California College Pathways, Washington’s Passport to College, Ohio’s Reach, The Mission for Education Reach for Texans, and North Carolina’s Reach are also offering addition post-secondary educational opportunities for foster youth. The Great Expectations Program in Virginia and The Arizona Tuition Waiver Program have expanded post-secondary educational opportunities to former foster children as well (Cohn & Kelly, 2015; Foster Care to Success, 2013). These states have demonstrated that their campus support programs for foster care alumni have higher four-year post-secondary retention and graduation rates than their peers nationwide (See Appendix B).

Theoretical Models Built on Bourdieu’s Theories Capital

Building on Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural, social, and financial capital, many scholars have contributed and developed a framework for additional forms of capital. Two such noted scholars are Yosso (2005) who developed the concept community cultural wealth, which is an extended form of cultural capital, and St. John, Hue, and Fisher (2011) developed the concept of
academic capital formation, which is an extended form of cultural, social and financial capital. Yosso (2005) and St. John, Hue, and Fisher (2011) suggested that different cultures are capable of accessing various forms of capital other than capital passed down through inheritance. These models can not only explain why some former foster children have success obtaining a college degree but can also affect policies that better support former foster children with their pursuit of a college degree.

**Community Cultural Wealth Model**

Yosso’s (2005) concept of cultural wealth emerged from Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. Yosso (2005) argued that many scholars, such as Pierre Bourdieu, support the idea that the values, norms, and belief systems of the dominant group are the best way to acquire social and cultural capital. Yosso (2005) further asserted that communities of color possess community cultural wealth that is historically undervalued and unrecognized in many White, middle-class institutions such as four-year post-secondary education settings. Using critical race theory (CRT), Yosso (2005) designed a community cultural wealth model to identify the talent, strengths, and experiences that low-income students of color employ to their advantage to navigate the college setting. Yosso’s (2005) identified six forms of capital:

1. Aspirational capital - Refers to the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future despite real or perceived barriers (Yosso, 2005, p. 77).

2. Linguistic capital - Refers to the various ways language and communication skills such as the ability to communicate in more than one language and the ability to express expressions art, music, and poetry. Linguistic capital may enhance a student's ability for "memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm, and rhyme” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79).
3. Familial capital - Refers to the ability to employ a sense of community and the ability to utilize extended familial and community networks to navigate the college system (Yosso, 2005).

4. Social capital - Refers to the ability to access people and community-based resources that provide instrumental and emotional support regarding how to gain access and navigate the higher education system. For example, drawing on social contacts and community resources may help a student identify and attain a college scholarship. “These networks may help a student in preparing the scholarship application itself, while also reassuring the student emotionally that she/he is not alone in the process of pursuing higher education” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

5. Navigational Capital - Refers to the ability to navigate social institutions where navigational capital empowers the student to maneuver within unsupportive or racially hostile university campuses” (Yosso, 2005, p.80).

6. Resistance capital - Refers to skills developed through behavior that challenges inequality. This form of capital is passed down from “parents, community members and historical legacies of engaging in social justice” (Yosso, 2005, p.80).

Researchers have modified Yosso’s model to address the community’s cultural wealth of groups from diverse backgrounds and experiences. It is possible that Yosso’s community cultural wealth model can be used to shift scholarly perspectives associated with the post-secondary outcomes of foster care alumni from a deficit model to a strength-based model (Fox, 2016). For those foster care alumni who successfully navigated the four-year post-secondary institution, Yosso’s community cultural wealth model can be used to help understand how former foster children can transform their habitus as it relates to documented dismal four-year post-secondary outcomes.
Academic Capital Formation

By building upon Pierre Bourdieu’s constructs of economic, social, and cultural capital, St. John (2013) introduced the concept of academic capital formation as a means to create comprehensive and cohesive policies to improve post-secondary education access and persistence for underrepresented students (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). St. John (2013) defined academic capital as “the knowledge needed for a successful transition through the educational process, from initial engagement in education through completion of advanced degrees for professionals” (pg. 274). Like other forms of capital, academic capital passes on from generation to generation; therefore, if there is no family history of post-secondary achievement, academic capital is unlikely (St. John et al., 2011).

In their final analysis of academic capital, St. John, Hu, and Fisher (2011) generated six social processes used to aid underrepresented students in overcoming barriers to post-secondary achievement: 1) concerns about cost, 2) supportive networks, 3) navigation of systems, 4) trustworthy information, 5) college knowledge, and 6) family uplift. The social process, “concerns about cost,” was derived from Gary Becker’s concept of human capital theory (Becker, 1975). “Human capital refers to the knowledge, information, idea, skills, and health of individuals” that aids in increasing employment productivity (Becker, 2002, p. 3). According to Becker (1975), education is an essential investment in human capital because of its potential to raise future earnings. When deciding how much to invest in human capital, Becker’s theory implies that individuals make decisions about post-secondary enrollment and persistence based on cost (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). To achieve a successful post-secondary outcome, therefore, academic capital formation suggests that underrepresented students must overcome concerns about cost (Winkler & Sriram, 2015).
The social processes “supportive networks,” “trustworthy information,” and “navigation of systems” was derived from social capital theory (Coleman, 1988). Coleman broadly defined social capital as a valued resource for both marginalized and privileged groups that generates a useful source of daily information to facilitate specific actions that would have been difficult otherwise (Dagny, 2013; Tzanakis, 2013). Academic capital formation theory suggests that underrepresented students must build social networks (mentors, teachers, community leaders, and others), navigate social and education systems (ability to over barriers such as classism and racism) and acquire trustworthy information (receiving accurate information during critical times) to obtain social capital in the field of post-secondary education (St. John et al., 2011; Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

The social processes “college knowledge,” and “family uplift” was derived from Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1972). Bourdieu stressed that social, cultural, and economic capital is inherited interrelated constructs used in the reproduction of class inequalities (Mathon, 2005; Walther, 2014). Bourdieu defined economic capital as money and financial assets (Roth, 2000) and cultural capital as knowledge acquired from family background and education (Walther, 2014). Bourdieu defined social capital as information and social resources (Roth, 2000). Coleman’s (1988) social capital theory emphasized social mobility and perceived social capital functioning as a valued resource for both marginalized and privileged groups (Winkler & Sriram, 2015; Dagny, 2013; Tzanakis, 2013). Bourdieu, however, perceived social capital as a scarce resource for marginalized groups and perceived social capital functioning as an agent for reproducing class inequalities as well as inhibiting mobility for marginalized groups (Winkler & Sriram, 2015; Walther, 2014; Dagny, 2013; Tzanakis, 2013; Mathon, 2005). Academic capital formation stresses that underrepresented
students must build college knowledge (overall knowledge of higher education system) and achieve family uplift (encouragement) to overcome the reproduction of social class inequalities in the field of higher education (Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

**Chapter Summary**

The literature review was useful in understanding how researchers within the social science field employed the constructs of Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction. The review was also useful in learning how foster children are positioned (retention and graduation) within the field of post-secondary education as compared to continuing generation and first-generation students. The literature review found that many foster children leave the foster care system with many barriers that prevent them from pursuing a four-year post-secondary education: low expectations, inadequate independent living skills, mental health problems, lack of academic preparedness, and lack of financial resources.

Additionally, the literature review helped provide knowledge on how the principles of the global market have impacted the higher education field. The literature showed that economic and political influences within the higher education field have resulted in social stratification across many types of different higher education institutions because of increased competition and increasing participation of individual agents within the postsecondary education field. Therefore, the research suggested that the social compact that transpired over decades ago between higher education institutions, the state, and society does not currently exist.

Moreover, the literature revealed that different groups have different dispositions and worldviews towards a college education based on their experiences. According to the literature, dispositions or habitus are transformed when the education system and the desire to change adverse life circumstances influence optimism and college aspirations. Also, the literature
demonstrated that when policies create an opportunity to widen participation within the higher education system, a habitus can transform as well. Overall, the literature reveals that an individual has the potential to exercise agency over the structure of their habitus.

The literature also revealed that independent living could be not only ambiguous for foster children but caseworkers as well. The literature suggested that the foster care system may want to restructure the way the institution prepares a foster child for adulthood. Researchers found that former wards of the states had more positive outcomes when the focus is connecting a child aging out of the system with social support. Social support was the essential factor noted for postsecondary education success.

Lastly, the literature review presented limited knowledge concerning how foster care alumni who aged out of the Louisiana foster care system navigated the college system despite the unique challenges they encounter. Additionally, there was a gap in knowledge as it pertained to how cultural, social, and financial capital impacted the four-year postsecondary educational trajectory of foster care alumni compared to first-generation and continuing-generation students. The next chapter outlines the reasoning for using a multiple case study as a methodology for this research study.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

I raise up my voice - not so I can shout, but so that those without a voice can be heard...
— Malala Yousafzai
speech to The United Nations Youth Takeover

Methodology is the strategy, plan of action, or design that lies behind the choice of a particular research method (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). A research method is a procedure used to analyze data related to the research questions (Crotty, 1998, p. 3). From a dominant critical constructivist perspective, the study applied Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction and his constructs of habitus, field, and capital to apply a qualitative research design. This chapter is divided into three sections. First, an overview of the methodology chosen for this research design will be presented. Then, the research design, beginning with the research questions, is outlined. Later, the sample, data collection process, data analysis process, and the role of a researcher in each phase of the research design are described.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to understand the four-year post-secondary experiences and perceptions of Louisiana foster youth students, first-generation students, and continuing education students within the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field, and capital. Specifically, the researcher wanted to give meaning to the experiences of college-going students who grew up in the Louisiana foster care system as a better understanding of their perceptions of how cultural, social and financial capital impact their four-year post-secondary educational trajectory was sought.

Philosophical Worldview

From a critical constructivist perspective, the research’s chief goal was to give voice to those current and former foster youth desiring to pursue a four-year post-secondary degree
without access to the same amount of capital as their middle- and upper-income peers who did not grow up in foster care. There is a dearth of research regarding foster care alumni pursuing a four-year post-secondary education in the state of Louisiana. The body of scholarly research literature that exists suggests that foster care alumni often struggle with four-year post-secondary success because of class-based inequalities (Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Another goal of this research study was to, therefore, contribute and expand scholarly knowledge towards the existing literature on the foster care population in conjunction with four-year post-secondary education. The goal was also to broaden the knowledge of child welfare workers, educators, and legislators on how to best support the needs of Louisiana’s foster children who are pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree through policy and practices.

One of the essential undertakings of a critical constructivist researcher is to frame questions that seek out to understand how social and educational systems provide advantages for some people and disadvantages for others (Kincheloe, 2005). Scholars such as Manning (2016), argued that critical constructivists believe that there is a relationship between power and knowledge and that within any given culture, only certain groups of people or institutions can obtain a prominent status that allows them to become official holders of information. These privileged groups, as a result of their status, often uphold their “knowledge construction legitimacy” by typically devaluing the knowledge of subjugated groups (Manning, 2016; Kincheloe, 2005). As a critical constructivist, the researcher relied as much as possible on the subjugated epistemologies of emancipated foster children who had pursued a four-year post-secondary education so that they could gain a better understanding of what they perceived are the successful aspects as well as the challenges associated with obtaining a four-year post-secondary degree.
A critical constructivist approach to this research inquiry created a space for the researcher to expose dominant elitist assumptions associated with meritocratic principles and narratives such as “anyone can make it if they work hard.” This research study does not imply that hard work does not bring success. However, meritocracy, associated with hard work and competition, tends to produce an unequal playing field for many disenfranchised students pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree as well as create structural barriers for forming a true meritocratic environment (Meritocracy, n.d., para. 1). According to Pierre Bourdieu, the social inequalities linked to higher education often reproduces and legitimizes social hierarchies due to granting more access to privileged cultures because of their inherited economic, social and cultural resources; not because of talent and hard work (Mills et al., 2007).

Kincheloe (2005) identified several important ontological and epistemological underpinnings of critical constructivist research. Six underpinnings presented through this study include: 1) the world socially constructs - to know about the world, there must be a knower and that which is known. How the knower constructs the known constitute reality; 2) all knowers come from a historical time frame and therefore are historically and socially constructed. “Spatial” and “temporal settings” shapes and constructs our world, self and other; 3) the world and the knowledge of people socially construct on historical, social, economic, cultural and political playing fields; 4) research in the context of critical constructivism seek to understand the nature of constructs and are also primarily concerned with how information is processed and becomes validated knowledge; 5) critical constructivist researchers are concerned with how power plays a role in the process of validating knowledge and how this knowledge validation process helps privilege some people and marginalize other people; and 6) critical constructivist
researchers are detectives in search of new ways of seeing and constructing the world and therefore, knowledge that is dismissed by the dominant culture is valued.

The ontology and epistemology underpinnings of Kincheloe’s (2005) critical constructivism aligned closely with the key concepts of Pierre’s Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction. Bourdieu emphasized privilege, power, and inequality throughout his scholarly work (Dalah, 2016). He argued that the extent of a person’s efforts, as well as their inherited resources, impacts their position within a social structure (Bourdieu, 1977; Mills et al., 2007). Bourdieu contributed to the sociology of education. His interest in education came partly from a desire to understand “what it was to be a student” (Greenfell, 2012, p. 215).

**Pierre Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice**

This research study was situated within the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu to reflect upon the researcher’s interpretation of themes that will emerge from the data analysis. Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field, and capital provide critical insight into why historically disenfranchised groups have lower social and educational outcomes as compared to advantaged groups (Yasso, 2005). During the review of literature, the researcher discovered that there was a body of scholarly research that employed Bourdieuan concepts to explain the post-secondary outcomes of disadvantaged students (Burnell, 2015; Corwin, 2006; Corwin, 2008; Dortos & Chesiz, 2016; Jez, 2014; Lohfink & Paulsen, 2005). After becoming familiar with Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, it became apparent to the researcher that his theory could help make sense of why so many foster care alumni produce dismal post-secondary outcomes (Day et al., 2013; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005). The chief advantage of using Bourdieu’s theory of practice, therefore, is to frame the researcher’s understanding of the findings in this study. Ultimately, the researcher’s goal was to obtain a deeper understanding of
what factors motivate (habitus) some foster children in the state of Louisiana (agents) to enroll in a four-year post-secondary institution (field). The researcher also hoped to obtain a deeper understanding of what Louisiana college-going foster youth perceive as being necessary resources (capital) to achieve four-year post-secondary educational success (position in the field).

**Research Questions: Personal Reflection**

I grew up in an African American neighborhood during the late sixties and throughout the seventies that consisted of middle- to upper middle-income households. The cultural capital that I inherited placed a high value on a four-year college degree as many of the parents in my neighborhood, grew up during an era when education was unequal and constrained. My parents were both first-generation college graduates and educators by profession; therefore, they stressed the financial benefits of a college degree. To not enroll in a four-year post-secondary institution after high school was never an option for me or my siblings.

My transition from high school to college did not include an experience of financial or housing worries. I did not stress over how to balance work and class schedules. My parents were always supportive of my educational goals and were able to help me navigate the college system. I was home during the holidays, and when I needed advice, there was always someone available.

With all the noted academic struggles that foster youth experience, I often wondered what factors influenced their choice to pursue a four-year post-secondary education? I pondered over what it is like to be a former foster child pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree without the same financial and social support that the researcher had when the researcher attended college. I was also curious to know what it is like for a former foster child not to have financial and social
support to complete a college degree and what it was like to make the transition from foster care to college.

**Central Qualitative Question**

RQ1. What can we learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?

**Sub-questions**

RQ2. To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural, and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study?

RQ3. Is there a gap between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported?

RQ4. To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

RQ5. What are the theoretical, methodological, and policy implications of the research findings?

The research questions were formulated based on a review of the scholarly research literature and experience working with foster children. Based on the literature review, there is an assumption that former foster youth attend college with unequal access to social, financial, and cultural capital as compared to their middle-to upper-income peers who never experienced foster care, and as a result, many produce poor post-secondary outcomes.
Research Design

Creswell (2014) suggested that a qualitative design is most appropriate in situations where the research question is open-ended and begins with how, what, or why. The researcher’s goal was to explore the following central research question:

What can we learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing education students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?

Interpreting the experiences of college-going foster youth who are pursuing a four-year post-secondary education with numerical data would have been challenging because numbers typically do not provide the full scope and nature of a participant’s experience. A qualitative research design, however, allowed the participants in this study an opportunity to voice in their own words their unique experiences with four-year post-secondary institutions. A qualitative research design also provided a full scope and nature of what it meant to be a foster care alumnus attending a four-year post-secondary institution without the same social, financial and cultural capital as their middle to upper-income peers who did not experience foster care by responding to open-ended interview questions. The researcher determined, therefore, that a qualitative research design was the most appropriate way to explore the research questions or analyze the phenomenon under study.

Comparative Embedded Multiple Case Study

One of the fundamental purposes of this study was to understand and give meaning to foster care alumni’s perceived experiences with four-year post-secondary institutions. After considering the strengths and appropriateness of each qualitative tradition, the researcher decided that a multiple case study was the most appropriate qualitative tradition to give voice to an
invisible population of students who identify as foster care alumni. The embedded-multiple-case study narratives in this study allowed an opportunity to obtain individual narratives from each participant as well as analyze and interpret each category of students through the lens of Pierre’s Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction (Merriam, 2009).

**Case Study**

A case study design is “when the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information” (Creswell, 2014, p. 97). According to Yin (2014), a case study can be about a person, a group, a situation, or an event. A case study is appropriate when the research questions focus on “how” or “when,” and when the researcher cannot influence the behavior of the participants in the research (Yin, 2014). A case study is also appropriate when the researcher would like to cover contextual conditions because they believe these conditions are relevant to the phenomenon associated with their research (Baxter & Jack, 2008). This study explored and compared the similarities and differences between three groups of former and current college student populations, specifically focusing on how different types of resources (or lack of resources) impact how each group navigates their path to four-year post-secondary retention and completion.

This case bounded within the context of how current and former college students navigated through the four-year post-secondary education setting. This study also sought out to answer the following research questions: 1) To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural, and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study, 2) Is there a gap
between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported, 3) To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

Yin (2014) described a matrix of four types of case studies: single-case design holistic, single-case design embedded, multiple-case design holistic, and multiple-case design embedded. A holistic design involves a single unit of analysis; an embedded design consists of sub-units within a case and involves multiple units of analysis (Yin, 2014). According to Yin (2014), multiple-case studies are generally preferred and are considered more robust than single case studies (Yin, 2014). Because this research study intended to compare three different samples of former and current college students, the researcher decided that a comparative, embedded multiple case study design was most appropriate.

Overall, this research study aimed to compare the perceived college experiences of three categories of college students in the context of how they navigated the four-year post-secondary education system with or without access to various forms of capital. A comparative embedded multiple case study design provided me with an opportunity to rigorously describe and explore this phenomenon with multiple sources of data collection (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Another goal of this comparative embedded multiple-case study was to capture various perspectives from former and current undergraduate students who enrolled at a four-year post-secondary educational institution. This multiple case study design nested in the context of four cases: the point of view of the foster care alumni college student, the point of view of the first-generation college student, the point of view of the continuing education college student, and the point of view of the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Foster care caseworkers were
integrated into the case study protocol as well, to gain more information on how foster children choose to pursue a four-year post-secondary degree. Child welfare caseworkers served as embedded units within The DCFS case study. Also, each participant in this research study represented a sub-unit within a case where the primary analysis occurred. The overall goals for analysis were to purposefully examine the pertinent themes evolving from the individual narratives of each participant within the case studies and then identify any similarities and differences within and across cases (Merrian, 2009; Yin, 2014). See Figure 1 for details.

A fundamental element of the case study is that it begins with a theoretical proposition or an assumption (Yin, 2014). The literature review in this current study implied that the more cultural, social, and financial capital a student has access to, the more likely they will achieve academic success (retention and completion). Based on the literature review, there is also an assumption that former foster youth attend college with unequal access to social, financial, and cultural capital as compared to their middle- to upper-income peers who never experienced foster care and, as a result, foster care alumni produce poor post-secondary outcomes. This research study aimed to, therefore, explore if all of the included cases followed Bourdieu’s theoretical assumption that the more field-specific resources (capital) an agent has in the field, the more social mobility he or she will obtain in the field (Mathon, 2005; Walther, 2014). The field, in this case, was the four-year post-secondary education setting.
Figure 1. Case Study Design of Current Research Study

Recruiting Strategy

A qualitative methodology seeks to understand an individual’s perception of an experience (Patton, 2002). Creswell (2014) stated that the point of a qualitative inquiry is not to generalize information about a participant but to collect detailed, specific information about a participant’s experience. The qualitative research aims to gain knowledge from the subjective reality of the participants. A large sample, therefore, would produce superficial knowledge for a qualitative study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Collumbien, Busza, Cleland, and Campbell (2012) and Palinkas et al. (2015) recommended selecting a small sample of individuals experienced and knowledgeable about the phenomenon explored during the qualitative inquiry. In order to assure the appropriate sample for this qualitative research study, the researcher considered the following principles: 1) the sampling strategy should originate from the research questions and the conceptual framework identified in the study; 2) the sample should create a comprehensive database of the type of phenomenon under the study; 3) the sample should allow space for possibly drawing clear inferences and credible explanation from the data; 4) the sampling
strategy should be ethical; 5) the sampling plan should be practical; 6) the sampling plan should permit the researcher to generalize/transfer the conclusion of the research study to other settings and populations; and 7) the sampling outline should be as efficient as it is practical (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Both a purposeful maximum variation and a snowball sampling procedure were used for this research study. Patton (2002) claimed that diversity among a small sample could be problematic because one individual experience can differ from another’s. By employing a purposeful maximum variation sampling approach, the problematic issue of a small sample can change from a weakness into strength because this strategy allows the researcher to identify common patterns and themes emerging from a shared phenomenon of interest by individuals with a range of personal characteristics. Snowball sampling is a process where the researcher recruits a sample from participants currently involved in a research study by asking the participant, “whom else can I talk to about this phenomenon” (Patton, 2002)? The goal was for the sample to engage in a chain of referrals where the size of the sample snowballed into something more substantial or reach sample saturation. The data collection and data analysis from a small, diverse sample yielded two valuable outcomes during this qualitative inquiry: 1) uniquely detailed descriptions of each case, and 2) common patterns emerged from variation and diversity (Patton, 2002).

**Cases**

The researcher purposefully selected four cases for this study. The cases reviewed in this study included subsections that ranged from five to six. The units in the cases were selected using a combination of maximum variance and snowball sampling procedures. Three of the cases consisted of participants who were attending or who had graduated from a four-year university
and who self-identified as one of the following: foster care alumni students, first-generation students, or continuing education students. One case consisted of DCFS caseworkers.

Recruiting foster care alumni and DCFS caseworkers to join in this study was challenging. When a foster child answers yes to “are you a ward of the state,” on the Free Application for Federal Aid (FASFA), the applicant is automatically eligible for financial aid resources. Answering, “yes” to the foster child question on the FASFA, assures foster care alumni a full federal Pell grant and an Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) offered by the John H. Chafee program (Chafee). The Family Educational and Privacy Act (FERPA) prohibits direct access to the names and contact information of any student. Being able to solicit former foster care students receiving the Chafee scholarship provided strength to this research because all of these students have experience with foster care as well as experience with four-year post-secondary institutions.

To identify foster care alumni to participate in this research, the researcher reached out to financial aid offices at both public and private four-year post-secondary institutions across the state of Louisiana. Only one four-year public institution agreed to submit an invitation to participate in this research study to students who had identified as former foster children on the FASFA on behalf of this researcher. This financial aid office identified 159 students enrolled at their school during the award years 2017-18 that indicated that they were wards of the state on their FASFA application. Six students from that mass email responded to the researcher’s invitation to participate in the study. When it was time to schedule interviews, however, none of the six students responded to calls or emails. Several additional efforts to recruit foster care alumni for this study included outreach to various college administrative departments throughout the state of Louisiana as well as social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.
The researcher was, however, able to recruit six former foster children who had experience with four-year post-secondary education from former DCFS caseworkers and through snowball sampling.

As a former therapist employed at a non-profit agency that contracted with DCFS, the researcher had developed relationships with a few of the caseworkers at the agency. Several of these former caseworkers were able to assist in connecting the researcher to caseworkers currently employed at DCFS and working with foster children aging out of the foster care system. To avoid any bias in this study, the researcher avoided recruiting caseworkers that were known to the researcher.

The researcher also used outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to recruit first-generation and continuing-generation students. Fortunately, this process was easier than recruiting former foster children and DCFS caseworkers. Once a sample saturation point of former foster children and DCFS caseworkers was reached, the recruitment process for this study was halted.

**Data Collection Process and Procedures**

Interviews with former and current college students and DCFS caseworkers served as the principal underpinnings for data collection for this research study. Yin (2014) stated that the interview is one of the essential parts of a case study. This research study used both semi-structured individual interviews and open-ended surveys to gather an in-depth understanding of how a diverse group of college students navigates the four-year post-secondary educational setting with access to different forms of capital. Also, the interview is primarily the most common method for data collection in qualitative research design (England, 2012). In a qualitative inquiry, researchers seek out to understand a phenomenon from the participant’s point
of view. Qualitative interviews, therefore, can give voice to many people, including those who are marginalized and who do not usually speak out at public forums (Kval, 2006).

There are two primary forms of qualitative interviewing: structured and unstructured (a semi-structured interview falls between the two). A structured interview includes a complete script prepared in advance. The interviewer often uses scripts in surveys, and sometimes the interviewer does not need to be present to conduct the interview (Myers & Newman, 2007). If present, the interviewer sticks to the interview protocol and does not modify any interview questions (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Due to the time constraints and for their convenience, DCFS caseworkers responded to an open-ended electronic survey. The surveys were the primary form of data collection for this sample.

In contrast, an unstructured interview involves an incomplete script with the intent to improvise during the interview. An unstructured interview is typically conducted by the researcher or by a person on a research team (Myers & Newman, 2007). Most researchers conducting a case study perform semi-structured interviews to capture the research participant’s story (Squire, 2008). The researcher conducted either a one-time semi-structured face-to-face or telephone interview with each former and current college student so that data on the perceptions, memories, thoughts, imagination, and emotions of each participant’s experiences with four-year post-secondary institutions could be collected. A semi-structured interview allowed the researcher flexibility to create an interview protocol in advance and modify the interview questions so that the participant could adequately reflect on their experience (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The primary goal of this research study was to gather information about how three different categories of college students perceived their four-year post-secondary experiences and
to capture a complete picture and essence of how each participant described the phenomenon of interest. To formulate interview questions related to the research purpose, McNamara’s (2009) guideline for developing effective interview questions was followed so that a deeper probe into the participant’s experiences and knowledge could be accomplished. Each interview question, therefore, was open-ended so that the research participants could respond on their terms. Each interview question was neutral as to avoid evoking responses of feeling judged, and each research question incorporated words designed to relate to the participant’s culture. Also, the researcher developed a protocol for interviewing the research participants. The researcher conducted a pilot test with participants who shared the same historical background as the research participants. A pilot test determined if the interview approach had limitations or if the research questions needed revision (Turner, 2010).

The interview protocol for this research study was to understand how Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory impacted the four-year post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni students, first-generation students, and continuing education students. Participants were first contacted by email with background information about the research study. Attached to the email was an informed consent form for the participant to read, signed, and returned to the researcher by email. Each participant was debriefed on the purpose of the interview, was provided an explanation of the interviewer’s role as researcher, and an explanation of his or her rights as participants. The researcher took the time to establish the trust and a rapport so that each participant felt at ease sharing information about their post-secondary educational experience. The interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes. Verbal consent, therefore, was obtained to audio record the participant’s interview. As a backup to the audio recording, field notes were also taken during the interview to record the researcher’s observations of the
participants. Memos were used to document themes emerging from probing and follow-up questions. Memos were dated so that the researcher could correlate them later with the data collected. A series of qualitative questions were asked to obtain demographic, background, knowledge and experience information regarding the participant’s experience with a four-year post-secondary institution. Two face-to-face interviews in a quiet, public setting that was convenient for the participant were arranged. The interviews were also conducted in a way that maintained privacy and confidentiality within a public setting. Each interview took thirty to forty-five minutes. After interviewing each participant, permission was obtained to make contact by phone if any further clarification concerning statements achieved during the interview was needed. Also, after the interview, the researcher reflected and interpreted the experiences by writing observations, concerns, and insight in a journal.

To detach from the participant’s narratives during the data collection process, the researcher reflected upon prior knowledge associated with the experiences of foster care alumni at four-year post-secondary institutions so that all preconceived biases related to the phenomenon could be brought to light. A research journal reflecting on the entire research process that included, the researcher’s role in constructing knowledge; thoughts on the data collection and data analysis process, and perspectives on the subtle ways power shaped this research was maintained.

**Qualitative Data Analysis**

Case study research does not have a template or a clear methodology to analyze data (Squire, 2008). The goal of this research inquiry, therefore, was to interpret and to make sense of the data obtained from the interview process by blending the researcher’s knowledge and the participants’ point of view about the phenomenon (Lopez & Willis, 2004; Reiner, 2012). Critical
constructivists seek to understand how power enters the interpretation act during the data analysis process. The researcher’s goal as a critical constructivist was to authentically interpret the participant’s stories by constantly reflecting and being mindful of the researcher’s role in giving voice to the foster care alumni experiences with four-year post-secondary education. Also, interpretation from a critical stance allowed the researcher to hear the voices of marginalized groups in this study and give meaning to them (Kincheloe, 2005; Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Data were analyzed for this case study in three phases: 1) case descriptions, 2) within-case analyses, and 3) cross-case comparisons. The constant comparative method for conducting both a within-case analysis and a cross-case analysis was used. Merriam (2009) asserted that the constant comparison method is commonly used in qualitative studies as it allows the researcher to continually compare emerging patterns and themes within and across each case. As a novice researcher, Creswell’s (2014) six steps for analyzing data were also used as a guideline for interpreting the data in this research design. Creswell’s six steps include: 1) prepare for data analyzing by organizing the transcripts, interviews and field notes, 2) review all the research data collected, 3) code the research data by categorizing and labeling, 4) identify the themes developed in the data analyzing process, 5) analyze and interpret the results of the research data, and 6) validate the credibility of the findings. After the data was analyzed, it was connected to the literature review and research questions.

The researcher transcribed each participant’s responses and later coded and analyzed the data using Atlas/ti. ATLAS/ti is a computer-assisted data management software program for qualitative data (Herkama & Laajalahti, 2013). The software allowed the researcher an opportunity to engage in a comparative method to focus on the similarities and differences in four-year post-secondary experiences between three categories of college students. To code the
raw data from the transcripts, both descriptive and In-Vivo Codes were used. Both methods are basic approaches to code data in qualitative research (Saldaña, 2013). Descriptive coding provides a single word or phrase to summarize the main topic within the context of a passage, whereas in-Vivo coding highlights the exact words from the participant’s transcript.

Memos were created in ATLAS/ti, which allowed the researcher an opportunity to reflect on how the data connected to the methodology, the theoretical concept, and the literature review (Merriam, 2009). Also, tables were used to present the categories of codes, themes, and quotes that emerged from this study.

**The Role of the Researcher**

The researcher’s role in this inquiry was based on twenty years’ experience working with foster children at a non-profit agency. The researcher worked with this population in a variety of capacities – residential, therapeutic foster care, private foster care, and more. The researcher witnessed, firsthand, the constant educational challenges that children experience while in foster care. The experience working with former foster youth who were pursuing a college degree had such a profound effect on the researcher that pursuit of a doctoral degree in higher education administration was undertaken.

As a critical constructivist, the researcher realized that their own life experiences could impact the interpretations of the data in this research study, so they needed to position themselves in the research to acknowledge that fact. The researcher’s experience as a doctoral student has made them aware of the achievement gap in education between marginalized groups and non-marginalized groups. As a result, the researcher developed a critical approach to understanding the educational issues associated with foster care children: special education, access to educational resources, college preparation and access, low expectations for post-
secondary education, and student loans. The researcher’s goal, therefore, was to add to the scholarly knowledge by exploring how to level the playing field in higher education for disenfranchised populations.

Miles and Gayle (2007) claimed that Pierre Bourdieu perceived research as partial and maintained that researchers need to acknowledge upfront that their bias can influence the direction of the research that they are conducting. Reflexivity can enhance value, trustworthiness, and ethics throughout the research process as well as address issues of bias (Milles & Gayle, 2007). The researcher used Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction to provide insight into why foster care alumni produce low post-secondary outcomes and continued using this theory as a guide and frame of reference throughout the research process. A journal was maintained as a method to reflect on my prior knowledge of foster care alumni’s post-secondary outcomes throughout the research process. The journal was also kept so that the researcher could stay present and fully involved throughout the study.

Validity

Creswell (2014) defined qualitative validity as a way for the researcher to check the accuracy of their research findings by employing various strategies. Validity enhances the credibility, authenticity, and trustworthiness of the research findings (Creswell & Miller, 2000 as cited in Creswell, 2014). This research design employed the validity strategies of triangulation, member checking, rich thick descriptions, peer review/debriefing, ethical considerations, and data storage.

Triangulation

Triangulation is a method where the researcher compares and cross-checks the consistency of multiple data sources obtained at different times (Patton, 2002). In this research
study, multiple data sources were collected, including qualitative-in depth interviews, observations, field notes, memos, and a research diary. The data was cross-checked to assure consistency throughout the research. The participant’s description of the phenomenon was also cross-checked against my observations during the data collection process. After completing the transcripts, common themes were sought, and then the researcher explored whether these themes were consistent with the literature review. Codes were cross-checked with the data collected (transcripts, field notes). Lastly, the researcher crossed-checked for bias and distortions by assuring what was learned from the participant’s description of the phenomenon supports the research findings.

**Member Checking**

Member checking determines the accuracy of the research findings by taking a semi-polished product back to the participant and allowing them to comment on the information presented to them (Creswell, 2014). Of the twenty-one participants in this study, only one provided corrections to their transcript.

**Rich, Thick Descriptions**

The participants were quoted as much as possible to ensure accuracy. The research study included as much detail as possible about the participants’ perceptions and emotions about the phenomenon so that the reader could grasp the full essence of the participants’ experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

**Peer Review/Debriefing**

A peer reviewed research questions, codes, themes, and research findings, to assure that the research resonated with other scholars. Creswell (2014) refers to this strategy as an interpretation beyond the researcher.
Ethical Considerations

The role of a qualitative researcher is to comply with a code of ethics when conducting research. Therefore, steps were implemented as it related to the ethical behavior of this research design. First, before proceeding with this research study, a proposal to conduct this research was submitted to the Internal Review Board (IRB) for approval. Participants in this study were informed of the purpose of this research study. Consent was also secured from each. The researcher’s work experience as a counselor provided the skills to attentively respond to the participants’ concerns during the data collection process. The researcher monitored whether the participant was experiencing any unpleasant emotional issues from the interview. If the participant experienced any severe unhealthy stress, the researcher was prepared to stop the interview and then refer the participant for mental health care. Also, the researcher disclosed past and present experiences that could influence the conclusion of the research study by including a reflection section in the research study. Pseudonyms replaced the identities of the research participants to protect confidentiality.

Data Storage

The researcher labeled a file for each participant with his or her pseudonym. Each record included the following documentation: consent form, field notes, memos, interview transcripts, and drafts from data analysis (codes and themes). This documentation was stored in a locked cabinet. The researcher saved all electronic data in a password-protected folder on a laptop computer.

Pragmatic Concerns and Challenges

Several limitations to this study should be kept in mind when viewing the results of this research. The first limitation of this study was geographical. Most of the participants invited to
participate in this study resided in the state of Louisiana. Another limitation of this study was the sample of foster care alumni. Initially, the goal of the research was to recruit foster care alumni who were still enrolled in college at the time of the study. The sample of foster care alumni in this study had graduated, dropped, or temporarily withdrew from a four-year, post-secondary institution. The data from former foster youth still enrolled in college at the time of this study could have been valuable to this research study. However, data from former foster children who had either graduated or did not complete their four-year, post-secondary education proved to be just as useful to this research study. Also, there was an oversampling of African American females and an under-sampling of diversity. Therefore, it is uncertain whether the findings in this study are accurate or consistent for all foster children. Lastly, the sample size for each case was small. Due to this limitation, the researcher could not generalize findings to all foster care alumni college students, all first-generation students, all continuing generation students nor all DCFS caseworkers.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presented an outline of the methodology used to explore and compare the similarities and differences between three groups of former and current college students; specifically focusing on how different types of resources (or lack of resources) impact how each group of students navigate their path to four-year post-secondary retention and completion. Also included in the methodology was an overview of how information regarding the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services’ role in supporting foster children with their four-year, post-secondary aspirations as well was obtained. The research study provided a rationale for engaging in a multiple case study to investigate four different groups: foster care alumni, first-generation students, continuing-generation students, and DCFS caseworkers. In addition, a
description of the research sample, as well as an outline for data collection and data analysis procedures, were included. Lastly, an overview of how the trustworthiness and the ethical considerations of this research study were ensured, was presented. Chapter four will present the data and summary findings.
CHAPTER 4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The point of my work is to show that culture and education aren’t simply hobbies or minor influences. They are hugely important in the affirmation of differences between groups and social classes and in the reproduction of those differences.

— Pierre Bourdieu
interview with Emily Eakin of The New York Times

This research sought to understand the four-year post-secondary educational experiences and perceptions of Louisiana foster youth students, first-generation students, and continuing education students within the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field, and capital. Specifically, the research study wanted to give meaning to the experiences of college-going students who grew up in the Louisiana foster care system to better understand their perceptions of how cultural, social and financial capital impacted their four-year post-secondary educational trajectory. This study also explored how DCFS caseworkers perceived their professional efforts in transitioning a foster child from the foster care system to four-year post-secondary education as well as to living independently.

As discussed, Bourdieu used the concepts field, capital, and habitus in the theoretical framework, and the researcher used these constructs to generate the findings in my study. Bourdieu defined the term field as a hierarchical space for social interaction where agents interact with each other by “field-specific rules” (Walther, 2014). How an agent ranks in this hierarchy depends on field-specific resources that Bourdieu identified as capital. In the context of retention and completion, this case study approach allowed the participants an opportunity to articulate their stories and give meaning to their four-year post-secondary educational experiences. Also, this case study approach provided further insight into the “where” and “how” former foster youth ranked within the college arena (field) as compared to their peers who did not grow up in foster care. Through the use of their authentic voices, the research participants
helped to make sense of how capital played a role in creating an unequal playing field for many disenfranchised students pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree and helped to make sense of how an uneven playing field created many structural barriers for constructing a true meritocratic college environment. Lastly, this case study provided a lens for understanding what factors influenced (habitus) the participants (agents) to enroll in a four-year post-secondary institution (field) and how the participants navigated the field (four-year post-secondary setting) with the resources (capital) available to them.

The research questions in this study were:

**Central Qualitative Question**

RQ1. What can we learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing education students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?

**Sub-Questions**

RQ2. To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study?

RQ3. Is there a gap between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported?

RQ4. To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

RQ5. What are the theoretical, methodological and policy implications of the research
findings?

The following sections demonstrate how three categories of college students navigated the path to four-year post-secondary education in terms of their habitus, and in terms of the levels of capital, they had access to. The researcher began by describing each case. Following a description of the four cases presented in this research study, the researcher provided a within-case analysis of each case to highlight the main coding categories and the recurrent themes that emerged from the data. Lastly, the researcher provided a cross-case analysis to compare the differences and similarities of themes that emerged from each case.

**Description of the Cases**

To understand the four-year post-secondary experiences of a diverse group of former and current college students, a multiple case study was conducted. The researcher engaged in a semi-structured interview with sixteen current and former college students who self-identified as foster care alumnus, first-generation students, or continuing generation students. The participants for this research study were selected because they had experience with a four-year post-secondary institution or experience with the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). Most of the sample had obtained bachelor’s degrees, and some were still attending some form of post-secondary institution pursuing varying degrees. One participant, for example, was attending graduate school and working towards a master’s degree. Another participant had attended a four-year college but decided to transfer to a community college. Not any of the participants disclosed attending a four-year college during the time the study took place. To provide more in-depth information on how DCFS influences and helps transition foster children from foster care to independent living, an open-ended question survey was administered and completed by five DCFS caseworkers. Two of the DCFS caseworkers disclosed that they were foster children
themselves. The next section describes the cases in the following order: DCFS caseworkers, foster care alumni, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students.

**DCFS Caseworkers**

Table 3 shows background information of five DCFS caseworkers that completed an open-ended survey. Except for one, all of the participants interviewed in this study were female. The experience of the caseworkers working with foster care youth varied. The most extended amount of time that a caseworker in this sample worked for DCFS was 22 years. The shortest amount a time that a caseworker in this sample worked for DCFS was three years. The caseworkers interviewed were located in either Baton Rouge or New Orleans. All of the caseworkers interviewed in this study reported that they had experience working with foster children aging out of the foster care system. Aging out of the system is referred, when a youth emancipates or leaves foster care because they turn a certain age, such as 18 or 21 (depending on the laws of the state they live in). Aging out usually results in loss of support from the State for things such as foster care payments, housing, living costs, and health services (FosterClub, 2017a, p.1). Nicki, a caseworker in this study, disclosed that she was a foster child. The researcher decided, therefore, to also use both her perspective as a former foster child navigating the college system for analysis in this study as well as her perspective as a DCFS caseworker. As shown in Table 3, Nicki does not have an extensive employment history with DCFS. Except for Nicki, all of the caseworkers a were given pseudonyms that mean “helper.” Nicki’s pseudonym means conqueror.
Table 3. Profile of Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) Caseworkers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Number of Years at DCFS</th>
<th>Employment Status with DCFS</th>
<th>Job Position</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Child Welfare Case Worker</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Child Welfare Supervisor-Foster Care</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Child Welfare Supervisor-Foster Care</td>
<td>New Orleans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicki</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Not Active</td>
<td>Child Welfare Case Worker</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Not Active</td>
<td>Child Welfare Case Worker</td>
<td>Baton Rouge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Foster Care Alumni*

Table 4 displays the demographics of six former foster children who have all had experience with four-year post-secondary education. The foster care alumni interviewed in this study were all female, and their ages at the time of the study ranged from twenty-four to forty-four. All of the participants, except for one, were African American. The ages of the participants, when they entered foster care, ranged from birth to seventeen. There are several different types of foster care placements. The most common kind of foster care is when the state places a child in its custody for an extended amount of time or until the child ages out of the foster care system. The child generally lives with a family or residential facility that is licensed by DCFS. Private foster care is where the state trains and provides licenses to for-profit or non-profit agencies to provide care to children removed from their biological home (“Do you know,” n.d). Except for one foster care alumnus, all of the participants experienced foster care through the state. Kaili
entered foster care through Casey Family Programs. Casey Family Programs is considered private foster care. Nicki lived in a residential facility before being placed with a foster family, and Latoya lived in a residential facility before aging out of the foster care system. Many participants in this study appeared to experience a fair amount of stability with foster care as well as with secondary education. Reyah and Latoya entered foster care at seventeen and had only been in foster care for approximately one year. Both Reyah and Latoya had attended multiple high schools before aging out of the foster care system. Reyah reported during her interview that she had experienced homelessness.

At the time of the study, one foster care alumnus had dropped out of college after her first year of enrollment to pursue a certification online. Another foster care alumnus was taking a break from college due to having to address mental health issues. She plans to return to college during the upcoming school term to complete her last two semesters. Two foster care alumni pursued graduate degrees. One had already obtained a master’s degree at the time of the interview. The other was actively pursuing her master’s at the time of this study. Three out of the six foster care alumnus had received bachelor’s degrees in social work. Two alumni, Nicki and Andrea, had been in foster care and had also pursued careers as caseworkers with DCFS. Due to time constraints, the researcher was only able obtain information about Andrea’s experience as a foster child and not as a case worker. On the other hand, the researcher applied both Nicki’s experiences as a former foster child navigating the college system and her experience as a caseworker for analysis in this study. Three out of the six participants in this study (Nicki, Reyah, and Andrea) pursued degrees in social work. All of the foster care alumni who participated in this study were giving pseudonyms meaning conqueror.
Table 4. Profile of Foster Care Alumni

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years in Care</th>
<th># Of Placements</th>
<th># Of High Schools Attended</th>
<th># Years in College</th>
<th>Degree Attainment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Colette</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Dropped</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicki</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaili</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reyah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pursuing Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latoya</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Leave of Absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First-Generation Students

Table 5 displays the demographics of the first-generation college students who participated in this study. The age range of the participants interviewed in this study ranged from twenty-five to thirty-eight years old. Except for one, the participants were African American females. One participant was Caucasian and a male. All of the participants in this study completed their four-year post-secondary education and had obtained bachelor’s degrees. Before their admission into a four-year college, two of the participants in this study had obtained associate degrees before obtaining their bachelor’s degree. One participant had received her master’s degree at the time of this study. All of the participants, in this case, disclosed that they had only attended one high school before their enrollment in college. The majority of the participants came from low socioeconomic backgrounds and had lived in a single-parent household.
### Table 5. Profile of First-Generation Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th># Of High Schools Attended</th>
<th># Years in two-year college</th>
<th># Years in 4-year college</th>
<th>Degree Attainment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cato</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramona</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veda</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Continuing-Generation Students**

As shown in Table 6, all of the participants who interviewed as continuing generation students were African Americans. The participants’ age ranged from twenty-four to forty-four. Except for two, all of the participants were female. Edmund, one of the males, in this case, attended a four-year college for one year, took a year off, and was attending a two-year institution at the time of the study. He plans to return to a four-year post-secondary institution after obtaining an associate degree. Felicia also took one year off from college before earning her bachelor’s degree. Felicia disclosed that she was initially enrolled at a PWI and later transferred and completed her post-secondary degree at an HBCU. Dawn completed a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, and a nursing degree. The number of high schools attended by the participants, in this case, ranged from one to three.
Table 6. Profile of Continuing Generation Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants (Pseudonym)</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th># Of High Schools Attended</th>
<th># Year in two year college</th>
<th># Years in 4 year college</th>
<th>Degree Attainment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Destiny</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edmund</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Enrolled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felicia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dawn</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis and Findings

The data analysis process started with data collection and was ongoing until the researcher produced empirically based findings. Four groups were presented as individual cases and examined in this research study:

1. DCFS Caseworkers, in which all five subunits in the case consisted of social welfare professionals who had experience working with foster children aging out of the foster care system.

2. Foster Care Alumni in which all six subunits in the case consisted of former foster children with experience attending a four-year post-secondary institution.

3. First-Generation College Students in which all five subunits in the case consisted of participants with experience attending a four-year post-secondary institution and who were the first in their immediate family to attend a post-secondary institution; and,
4. Continuing-Generation College Students in which all five subunits in the case consisted of participants with experience attending a four-year post-secondary institution and whose parents attended a post-secondary institution before them.

Twenty-one interviews were transcribed, the data was uploaded into the Atlas.ti software program, and the responses were analyzed based on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework. Creswell’s (2014) six-step guideline for interpreting and analyzing data was followed, as well as used a constant-comparative method to code the transcripts in each interview. During the initial stage of the data analysis process, the raw data from the transcripts labeled using descriptive and in vivo coding. Throughout this process, the researcher was able to assign meaning to segments of data that led to categorizing information relevant to the research questions. At first, the researcher set out to explore a mixture of words relating to social, financial, cultural capital, and independent living. All of the codes were revisited repeatedly throughout the data analysis process by reading and re-reading a hard copy of the participant’s transcript multiple times.

After the initial coding process, further analysis of the data was conducted using the constant-comparison approach. This approach entailed two stages of analysis: within-case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis. With this approach, the researcher was able to repeatedly sort and code the raw data and explore similarities and differences within and across each case through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction. For this reason, the researcher initially analyzed each transcript as an individual unit of analysis and then sought out similarities and differences within the group of participants who self-identified as “foster care alumni.” The researcher followed the same method for participants who self-identified as “first-generation students,” “continuing-generation students,” and “DCFS caseworkers” as well.
During the within-case analysis, the different codes generated during the initial coding process were thematically sorted and categorized. The codes were also grouped into categories relevant to Bourdieu’s theoretical concepts. For example, any quotes regarding parent’s level of education, family expectations for attending college, participation in extracurricular activities that generated knowledge associated with college attendance, and values associated with a college education were coded as cultural capital. Any quotes regarding social networks associated with college that included mentors, peers, family members, and community resources were coded as social capital. Any quotes regarding monetary resources used to support college attendance were coded as financial capital. Any quotes regarding dispositions towards education, life circumstances and worldviews, experience with education, and the participant’s perception of their academic capabilities were coded as habitus. Lastly, codes were thematically generated to address critical issues about the literature review and to address the research questions in this study as well. For instance, college and university programs aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni and the perceptions of the levels of capital foster children receive as wards of the state were coded and grouped into themes as well. By identifying relevant codes about college programs and caseworker’s perspectives, the researcher was able to code and group into themes relevant theoretical, methodological, and policy implications of the study’s findings.

After generating themes for each case (within-case analysis), the researcher looked for commonalities, patterns, and differences across all cases. During the cross-case analysis, the researcher created an Excel spreadsheet with headers indicating the themes present in each case. The researcher then sought out specific codes generated by each group and placed them under the corresponding headers. The researcher also noted on the spreadsheet any similarities and
differences between each group. The cross-case analysis enabled the researcher to highlight the findings regarding the research questions. Also, the cross-case analysis served as a vital method in exploring how capital varied between each category of students in this research study.

**Within Case Analysis**

This section presents the findings from the data collected from each participant in this research, resulting in four case studies. The primary data collected consisted of in-depth interviews, field notes, and memos. All four cases provided substantial value and unique perspectives to this research, especially as it pertained to foster care alumni and four-year post-secondary education. The findings for each case are presented separately and include tables displaying codes, categories, and themes generated from each case. Some codes are associated with more than one category and some themes varied with each overlapping code within each case. A narrative analysis of the themes employing direct quotations from each case is presented in the findings as well. A cross-case analysis is presented in chapter five.

**Emerging Themes from the Analysis of DCFS Case Workers**

The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) is a hierarchical social field where caseworkers frequently engage in a collective struggle to facilitate services within the constraints of a deficit-based structure that, historically, was not intended to transition children into adulthood. Often, caseworkers are situated in a field structured with frequent reorganization due to budget cuts resulting in high turnover rates, demanding caseloads, and limited resources. The deficits within the child protection field are often a result of bureaucratic regulations influenced by internal and external conditions that often restrict movement within its social space. According to Reay (2004b), habitus is permeable and responsive to a field that it encounters. The professional habitus for most child welfare workers tend to center around
support for social justice and public welfare; however, the structural forces within a field can play a significant role in transforming a collective habitus that either lowers or raises a future expectation from the initial one (Reay, 2004b; Wiegmann, 2017). This notion of habitus can offer some explanation regarding how caseworkers are predisposed to their perceptions and attitudes relating to foster children participating in higher education.

Table 7 displays the results from an open-ended survey completed by five former and current DCFS caseworkers. Four themes emerged from the analysis: predisposing factors towards post-secondary education, values, and knowledge associated with post-secondary education, informal and formal social networks facilitating post-secondary education, and knowledge for navigating the college system.

Table 7. Summary of Themes for DCFS Case Workers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectations to attend college,</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Predisposing Factors Towards Post-secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>independent living programs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values associated with helping people,</td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Values, Knowledge and Skills Associated with Post-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tangible and non-tangible skills valued</td>
<td></td>
<td>secondary Education Attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Living Programs</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Post-secondary Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chafee Funds</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td>Financial Resources Addressing Post-secondary Costs and Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme One: Predisposing Factors Towards Post-Secondary Education

The data from the caseworkers’ surveys revealed several key findings. First, the data revealed that expectations for foster children to pursue post-secondary education are low. As one case worker indicated, “In my own perspective, a youth graduating from high school is a huge success. I have contact with very few children who express an interest to go to college. The majority are interested in going to the job force and making money right away” (Alex). Another caseworker added, “college was not something the foster care kids cared about” (Nicki).

The caseworkers appeared to contradict the statistics that showed 84% of foster care youth aspire to attend college (Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, 2013; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). Hines et al. (2005) offered a possible explanation regarding this contradiction in that many foster children have a tendency to internalize the perceived low expectations of them and therefore perceive that the possibilities of their life circumstances are limited. This revelation aligned with Kirk et al. (2013) and Unrau et al. (2012) claims that the expectations of caseworkers and the other professional advocates standing in for them are low as well.

Another finding was that many of the caseworkers in this study appeared to suggest that independent living programs did not play a role in facilitating post-secondary aspirations among foster children. Despite this fact, caseworkers in this study also appeared to suggest that motivation was a vital trait necessary to succeed in all future endeavors, including post-secondary education. For example, one caseworker (Ophelia) stated, “I think the individual has to be motivated to obtain a college degree because the program (independent living program) only provides the youth with the skills they will need in the future.” Another caseworker (Aida) added, “In my opinion, independent living motivates youth who are open to be motivated. Once
the youth attends independent living, I believe they will be motivated to learn new skills.”

Although the Young Adult Program had been eliminated due to budget cuts at the time of this study, one caseworker (Sandra) stated, “Once a child ages out of the foster care system, it is their choice if they wish to participate in the YAP – Young Adult Program to pursue their educational choices and other benefits they are afforded if they choose to continue partnering with DCFS until the age of 24. However, each youth has to be motivated to continue working toward their future endeavors.”

Interestingly enough, it appeared that the caseworkers in this study might have a predisposition towards the ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy is a widespread American belief system that equates working hard (motivation) with success. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued, however, that meritocracy is an illusion grounded in the ideology of dominant groups and that the field of education is an arena in which social inequalities reproduce unequal distributions of economic, social, and cultural resources between privileged and marginalized groups. Therefore, as research often demonstrates, if the child welfare caseworker and school personnel fail to promptly transfer academic records when a foster child changes schools (Day, 2011), the foster child could risk falling behind academically. Being academically behind as a result of poor coordination between the child welfare system and the education system could lead to the caseworker perceiving that the foster child is not motivated to pursue post-secondary education and consequently, could lead to the caseworker not making any effort to help navigate the process to college enrollment. This revelation aligned with the research literature claiming that foster care alumni hold a disadvantage in the field of education due to not having access to the same level of capital as their non-foster care peers (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014).
The current research study focused on two modes of social fields: the field of child welfare and the field of post-secondary education. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1972), the field is a social space involving interactions between social agents. Similar to a competitive sports event, each field generates its field-specific resources as well as generates its own rules and social norms for interacting and for securing positions within the field (Leander, 2010; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). Within the child welfare field, it appeared that to facilitate aspirations and expectations from the caseworkers, one rule of the game is that foster children be perceived as motivated towards education. However, if the rule of the game within the post-secondary education field is to have access to cultural, social, and financial capital, what role did caseworkers play in providing these resources to foster children so that they will appear motivated to pursue this endeavor?

**Theme Two: Values, Knowledge, and Skills Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment**

One of the core values of the DCFS caseworkers in this study appeared to be helping others. When asked, “why you entered the child welfare field,” the most common response among all of the caseworkers was that they had a desire to help people. One caseworker (Aida) stated, “I entered the field of social work because I saw the needs of families. I wanted to do something to help.” Another caseworker (Alex) stated, “I entered the field of social work because I love helping people.” Another caseworker (Ophelia) echoed a similar response, “I entered the field to make a difference in the lives of families.” This caseworker (Sandra) reflected on how her experience helping her family members influenced her to pursue social work, “I’ve always been a caregiver for my immediate family because I like helping my family
as well as just generally have a giving spirit, so there is no other field I would have chosen except social welfare.”

For many foster children, reuniting with their biological family will not be an option. One way that caseworkers support children who are aging out of foster care is to help them navigate their transition from foster care to independent living. Some would argue that an essential aspect of independent living is to obtain a college degree because a college degree has the potential to accumulate capital (Jez, 2014). The caseworkers in this study, however, primarily identified life skills training, such as cooking and budgeting, as necessary to help foster children adequately transition from foster care to independent living. To illustrate these views, one caseworker (Ophelia) stated, “Foster children transitioning from care need real-life skills such as learning to cook, maintaining their living area, learning to do their laundry, filling out job applications, paying bills and balancing a checkbook.” This caseworker (Sandra) mentioned education as necessary, where the others did not. “Youth/adults transitioning from foster care into the community need life skills such as money management, job skills, education, and/or trade school experiences, budgeting such as grocery shopping and paying household bills.” Lastly, another caseworker (Nicki) reiterated, “they need basic self-help skills such as support, housing, job skills, stability, and income.”

Some caseworkers felt that foster children needed to learn non-tangible skills such as determination and to have an open mind. Caseworker (Aida) stated, “I believe foster care youth need the skills of determination and understanding. They need to be able to accept corrections and apply skills learned from independent providers, foster parents, and the caseworker in order to succeed at independent living.” This caseworker (Alex) echoed similar sentiments, “I feel
what a youth needs to successfully transition out of foster care are coping skills, an open mind, and determination.”

Merdiner et al. (2005), found that receiving information about college preparation classes and information about college choice influenced foster youth’s decision to attend college. None of the caseworkers in this study identified any college preparation skills such as time management, study skills, completing a college application as necessary for transitioning out of the foster care system. This finding appeared to support research claiming that the goal of post-secondary education for many foster care alumni is often vague and exclusive and that post-secondary education preparation and outcomes are seldom a priority among child welfare workers (Bruskas, 2008; Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2012; Foster Care to Success, 2013).

Knowing the way child protection meets the needs of foster children can help make sense of the recent findings in this study. Historically, the goal of child protection has primarily focused on safety, permanency, and the well-being of foster children (Bruskas, 2008; Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2012; Foster Care to Success, 2013). The concept of independent living, therefore, can be incredibly ambiguous for both the foster child aging out of the foster care system and the caseworker as well. This ambiguity comes into play primarily because the focus on establishing permanent connections to others abruptly shifts to focusing on self-sufficiency, which suggests that the foster child no longer needs help (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

The value of helping people and the bureaucratic practices of child welfare suggested a cultural mismatch in the way services delivery exists within the child welfare field. Garrett (2010) argued that working in a neoliberal context often produces tension among caseworkers within the child welfare field because they follow two masters: those whom they want to help
(foster children) and the administrators who create the bureaucratic practices for the state. Tension as a result of a cultural mismatch may explain the high turnover rate that frequently occurs within the child welfare field.

**Theme Three: Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-Secondary Support**

Most caseworkers enter child welfare well intent on delivering quality services to the children they serve, but the tensions resulting from budget cuts and workforce challenges often result in significant barriers that inhibit caseworkers from providing adequate support to foster children (Ellett, Ellis, & Westbrook, 2007; The Child Welfare Policy and Practice Group, 2016). Caseworkers always appear pressed for time during their interactions with foster children, and as a result, the fundamental values they hold regarding providing quality service delivery are often done away with (Knight, 2013). Also, the neoliberal restructuring of child welfare and the efforts to increase efficiency and manage cost have resulted in a growing trend of outsourcing services such as child placement, case management, and independent living skills training to the private sector (Hubel et al., 2013; Knight, 2013).

In response to how foster children obtain independent living skills, outsourcing to outside contractors was evident among the majority of the caseworkers in this study. For example, caseworker (Aida) indicated, “The youth on my caseload is receiving independent living through HP Serve and Youth receive life skills in-group homes.” Another caseworker (Ophelia) echoed a similar response, “The youth are referred to independent living skills whereas they are provided with the needed skills to live independently.” Caseworker (Sandra) added the age of a youth on her case load is referred to independent living programs, “The youth are referred for independent living skills upon their 17th or 18th birthday and are provided with the skills needed to live independently once they leave the foster care system.” Lastly, this caseworker (Nicki) stated, “I
ensure that youth on my caseload receive independent living skills with Independent living skills programs.”

In addition, there appeared to be a taken-for-granted attitude toward independent living programs as the responses from all of the caseworkers in this study suggested that independent living programs were the primary source used for transitioning youth out of foster care. Pierre Bourdieu used the concept doxa to describe how each field has its own taken-for-granted rules and values for understanding the world (Leander, 2010). Clearly, the doxa for preparing youth to age out of the foster system is to outsource independent living interventions. Due to high rates of homelessness, incarceration and unemployment outcomes of foster care alumni, many researchers in this study have questioned the effectiveness of independent living programs (Courtney et al., 2017; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; McDaniel et al., 2014; Propp et al., 2003).

**Theme Four: Financial Resources Addressing Post-Secondary Costs and Concerns**

All of the caseworkers appeared to know about the Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) Program in 2001. The ETV voucher is the first federal program that targeted the post-secondary needs of current and former foster care youth. This Act provides financial aid for post-secondary education and training. When asked about the ETV voucher for foster children, one caseworker (Ophelia) summed it up for all of the respondents, “The ETV voucher is a great resource for foster care youth so that they can continue their secondary education. I am not aware of any negative aspect.” Although the caseworkers were familiar with financial resources to aid foster children with the cost of post-secondary education, the open-ended survey did not present any data regarding how caseworkers pass down that knowledge to foster children?
Emerging Themes from the Analysis of Foster Care Alumni College Students

The child welfare system is a hierarchical field structured with two primary actors: caseworkers positioned at one end of the field and foster children positioned at the other. The primary role of the caseworker is to ensure the safety, permanency, and wellbeing of the foster child; the primary role of the foster child is to acquire resources and knowledge from their caseworker. Power imbalances often exist between the caseworker and the foster child due to the child’s reliance upon the caseworker. Consequently, foster children often see themselves as powerless, and child welfare workers can often develop a habitus oriented towards power and control (Wiegmann, 2017). A youth aging out of the foster system could perceive this sort of relationship as a barrier for navigating their way to adult independence.

Table 8 displays the results from a semi-structured interview with six former foster children. The participants in this study entered foster care at different times in their lives, ranging in age from infants to adolescents. The number of years the participants stayed within the foster system ranged as well. Two of the participants were only in foster care for approximately a year. However, all of the participants exited out of the foster care system at eighteen years old. The participants in this study were also former foster children who despite the odds, made a successful transition from foster care to independent living. Also, these participants succeeded in navigating the four-year post-secondary system as well. Six themes emerged from the analysis: Predisposed factors towards post-secondary education, knowledge, and values associated with post-secondary education, informal and formal social networks facilitating post-secondary support, financial resources addressing post-secondary costs and concerns, gaps in programs and services, college as a trajectory towards better circumstances than the present one.
Table 8. Summary of Themes Foster Care Alumni College Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past life experience, K-12 experience, perception toward academic abilities and attitude towards learning</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Predisposing factors towards Post-secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extracurricular activities, college expectations, values associated with helping people, education continuing across generations</td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Values, Knowledge, and Skills Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive connections to foster parents, friends, college roommates, mentor/role models, spouses, co-workers, therapists, tutors, guidance counselor, CASA, lawyers, the internet, orientation, advisors</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-secondary Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaffee Funds, PELL, TOPS, scholarships, student loans, time spent working</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td>Financial Resources Addressing Post-secondary Costs and Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aging out of foster care, independent living program, Chaffee, advocacy, low level of engagement with caseworker, lack of information, alienated and disconnected, family of origin, mental health (stigma), weekends and holidays</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Gaps in College Expectations and College Readiness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College necessary for a better life/future, college viewed as a way out of a difficult circumstance, community cultural wealth</td>
<td>Transformative Habitus</td>
<td>College as a trajectory towards better circumstances</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme One: Predisposing Factors Towards Post-Secondary Education**

Children enter the foster care system because of physical abuse or neglect by a parent or guardian. There are several different types of foster care placements. The most common kind of foster care is when the state places a child in its custody for an extended amount of time or until
the child ages out of the foster care system. The child generally lives with a family or within a residential facility that is licensed by DCFS. The participants in this study entered the foster care system for various specific reasons. One participant (Latoya) entered foster care as a result of the death of a primary parent, “My mom passed away. We had some troubles during her last days. I ended up in foster care, and she passed shortly after.” Another participant (Nicki) entered foster care due to a parent’s substance abuse,

The state was called on family several times. My mother had a substance abuse problem. She formulated her habit from her second husband. As a result, we were neglected. We were loved but neglected. There were times when we did not have food clothing or adequate shelter. They would pick us up and bring back my siblings, but I always got off the premises and ran to my cousin. The last time, I stayed because I just knew that there had to be something better.

Another participant (Reyah) entered foster care because their siblings could not sustain the responsibility of caring for them financially and reflected on how they were tired of being homeless, “My older siblings could not financially take care of me. I did not want to live with my siblings anymore, and I got tired of living on the streets.” Participant (Andrea) was raised in foster care from birth, “I was placed in foster care when I was age three months old. I grew up in the same foster care home until age 18.”

One significant finding revealed that the participants in this study experienced stable home and school placements while in foster care, which is not characteristic of the previous research claiming foster children often experience multiple home and school placements (Day, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). Although most of the participants in this study experienced a low number of home and school placements, the findings in this study revealed that the majority of the participants shared adverse K-12 experiences, which is typical of the previous research in this study (Day, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2011; Foster Care to Success, 2013; National
Council on Disability, 2008; National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2014). One participant described how she failed second grade (Andrea),

> K-12? B’s and some C’s. I did fail second grade due to what the teacher called was an attitude. I was considered a ‘bad little girl in school with a bad attitude.’ I would talk back to all the teachers. I was also a fighter due to being small in stature, other students would pick on me and call my foster mother fat, so this would make me angry and become upset.

Another participant (Nicki) described being out of place due to her life experiences,

> In fifth grade, I had almost straight F’s. In high school, I got to a point where I was tired. My teachers were very, very young. By high school, I had so many life experiences, that I did not have time to be there (school) with children. I would get suspended all the time.

A participant (Collette) described how her grades placed her at risk from being promoted to high school, “They (grades) were all right. I know once in middle school, they were kind of bad, and I was going to be held back in eighth grade, but they let me go on to high school.” Another student (Kaili) voiced how competitive the private school setting was for them, “I went to private school, and it was really competitive, and so that’s when I realized that my grades were so poor that I was going to have a hard time getting into high school.”

Two out of the six foster care alumni in this study appeared to have a positive attitude regarding their K-12 experience as well as a perceived positive academic capability. For example, this participant (Latoya) described her experience with being on the honor roll:

> I was an honor roll student, so I really didn’t fail at anything per se. I just preferred reading, English, science biology things like that over math. Chemistry was actually pretty cool. But I really loved biology.

Another student (Reyah) indicated that she attended both private and public schools and did not struggle academically with either, “K-12 I did private and public. I did not struggle academically.” These statements appear to support Merdiner et al. (2005) and Rios and Rocco
(2013) findings suggesting that school stability and academic rigor (being on the honor roll) contributes to a positive disposition toward post-secondary education.

In contrast, many of the other foster care alumni in this study reported an unfavorable attitude towards going to school and a perceived poor academic capability, which is typical of the research literature in this study. See the quote by (Kaili):

I did not like going to school, but I was so close to the end. I was not one of those people. If I wanted a good grade, I had to work really hard for it, and even sometimes, if I worked really hard, I still did not get a good grade, and that was really discouraging. I don’t test well, and state college (pseudonym) was so big there really isn’t like other scores like in high school. I was able to overcompensate my testing poorly when there was homework, essays, and project grades, so I excelled on getting my homework; I excelled on solo projects, so I was able to get my grades where I needed.

Another participant (Nicki) echoed a similar experience:

When I got in high school, I did not want to be there. I would get just enough to pass the test with a C. I did not have any study habits; I didn’t want to be there. I went to take the GED. I took the test and failed the science part by one point. Back then, I don’t know how it is now, but whatever part you failed, that is the part you had to make up.

Pierre Bourdieu suggested that having a positive attitude towards education is one crucial component of a college habitus (Sullivan, 2002). Even though many of the participant’s K-12 circumstances did not appear to align with a college habitus, all of the former foster children in this study went on to pursue a four-year post-secondary education. One possible explanation for this phenomenon is that the foster care alumni in this research study appeared to have the ability to reshape their disposition towards education so that it would align with a college-going habitus, a process that Mills (2008) described as transforming the habitus. A transformative habitus, according to Mills (2008), is one that “recognizes the capacity for improvisation and tends to generate opportunities for action in the social field” (p.7). The participants in this study demonstrated individual agency and acted in ways to transform their educational circumstances
by choosing to pursue a four-year post-secondary education (Burnell, 2015; Mills, 2008). Therefore, the foster care alumni in this current study contradicted a primary argument from critics claiming that Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is deterministic and do not leave room for change (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Mills, 2006; Reay, 2004b).

**Theme Two: Values, Knowledge and Skills Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment**

As many scholars have pointed out in this research study, the birth family transmits cultural capital as it relates to successfully navigating the post-secondary education system (Bourdieu, 1977; Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Roth, 2000; St. John et al., 2011; Walther, 2014). However, the current study appeared to contradict the scholars’ claiming that inherited knowledge and skills are. For example, it was evident that all of the participants in this study had a desire to attend college. The following declarations demonstrate how various circumstances influenced the participants to pursue a college degree:

College became a true visual at my foster mother’s house and that’s because she is one who did not have a college education and she made sure as a single woman that her kids received a college education so that they wouldn’t have the life that she had to go through (Nicki).

I was the only foster child out of all the 25 foster kids in that my foster mother reared to graduate from college. In fact, 2 of my biological siblings had already graduated from college so that to motivated me. I was the only child in that home who graduate from college out of my foster mother’s own biological children (Andrea).

That (college) was always my goal. I actually entered into college with a biology major because my entire middle school, high school career I thought I was going to be a doctor which I guess I still can be just in another direction (Latoya).

In contrast to the previous research indicating that knowledge is exclusively transmitted within the homes of biological families, this current research support claims that cultural capital
is not only transmitted from birth families but is also independently transmitted from settings such as social groups, schools, the foster care system and foster homes (Brar, 2016; Corwin, 2008; Goldthorpe, 2007). For instance, several of the participants in this study participated in K-12 extracurricular activities that are generally associated with generating knowledge regarding post-secondary education. Nicki, for example, reported participating in ROTC. Latoya stated, “In school, I was in the Beta Club, in middle school, I did some cheerleading.” One respondent (Reyah) indicated that she participated in a college preparatory program after school, “I did a few like leadership and after school programs and participated in a college preparation program.” Also, several of the participants mentioned they were motivated to pursue careers within the helping profession because of their experiences while in foster care. This statement illustrates how the participant was influenced to pursue a degree related to social welfare, “I just realized that I just wanted to make a difference in my community, so I ended up changing that (major) to social work (Latoya).” Another participant (Nicki) voiced a similar sentiment, “I want to work with foster children because of my experience with foster care. I wanted to take my caseworker’s job to show her how to be effective.”

Lastly, this statement warrants a brief analysis on social reproduction. “I feel that my life experience will help he or she (foster children) and they will use this as a tool in their lives to better themselves and focus on education as a goal to obtain (Andrea).” This foster care alumnus appears to have unconsciously demonstrated how social reproduction works in regard to providing post-secondary education opportunities to foster children. To further demonstrate this revelation, when asked, how comfortable were they with navigating through the college system, the same participant (Andrea) responded, “Very comfortable now, I had to prepare my children who are currently enrolled as well as getting ready to enroll.” Earlier in this current study, this
participant had demonstrated how an unfavorable habitus towards education could transform into a college habitus. This participant’s association with reproducing her college habitus among foster children and her children appeared to support Burnell (2015) claims that sometimes when social agents are offered opportunities and taken out of their natural social fields, habitus could transform. When a habitus changes, the transformed habitus can reproduce. This revelation suggests powerful implications for child welfare policies and practices.

Theme Three: Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-Secondary Support

Social capital is a network of relationships that provide information about resources and knowledge to help navigate the college system (whom you know) (Johnston, & Baumann, 2007; Walther, 2014). A key finding in this current research study revealed that social support varied and took on many forms. In regard to informal social networks, many of the participants reported that a positive connection with their foster family played a pivotal role in helping them stay motivated in pursuing their post-secondary goals. For example, this participant (Kaili) described the relationship with their foster parents, “I did eventually get attached back to them (foster parents) and they were very helpful. They were a huge support system for me.” Another participant (Andrea) credits her success to their foster parent, “My relationship with my foster mother was rewarding and I would not be the person I am today without her in my life, teaching and setting examples for me.”

Overwhelmingly, all of the participants identified friends as social support. One participant captured this sentiment for all in this current study, “My best friend pretty much walked me through the process. When I got on campus I was lost and if it wasn’t for my best friend at the time, who had been through it… (Nicki).”
Next, the participants identified a variety of formal social networks that were prevalent in assisting them when they were in foster care. For example, many of the former foster children kept in touch with their Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA). The following statements illustrate how the participants described this resource:

…everything was all in support of me – they were like, hey, this is a support for you. This is the help. Even my CASA worker – everybody was supportive. I had a CASA worker that really helped to support me” (Latoya).

Another participant (Reyah) described obtaining resources through an attorney and through CASA advocates, “Through a lawyer that I had in foster care and like some CASA advocates were like you know you are eligible for Chaffee educational funds?”

A few of the participants in this study described ongoing relationships with their mental health counselors as emotional and social support for navigating the college system. Kaili reported, “I had a really good relationship with my therapist. I still talk to her a couple of times.” Also, Nicki stated, “Between she (counselor) and mama, those were my two mentors, that was it.” Only one participant (Reyah) indicated that they had comprehensive college planning through a college preparatory program:

They help underrepresented students from public schools. They help with college application process. You start early on like your freshman year. In my junior year they took us on college tours. They helped us with the writing process and stuff like that. We had seminars on topics that we have to discuss. So that’s how I was able to go on college tours.

Three types of student services offered within the post-secondary settings were mentioned as helpful when navigating the college system: orientation, advising, and tutoring. A few of the participants mentioned utilizing these services:
When I enrolled, they had advisors that did two weeks of orientation at Spellman before classes actually started. So, I was able to get all of my freshman class like that. My college advisor helped me enroll into my classes so that wasn’t a struggle (Reyah).

Another participant (Kaili) illustrated how advisors helped her find tutors to help with understanding coursework:

Academically, when I was struggling with my grades, I really did not have any one to go to. I did reach out to someone on my own; I talked to an advisor at LSU who was able to connect me to some resources. I didn’t realize that LSU had a lot of tutoring available, the TAs kind of hang out in one room while you are doing homework. They will come over and assist you. That was really helpful.

Finally, the current study showed how social capital is not always independent of other forms of capital. This revelation aligned with Pierre Bourdieu claims that cultural, social, and economic capitals are interrelated as well as interdependent (Fox, 2016). Also, Corwin (2008) suggested that foster care alumni typically obtain their cultural capital from the courts and the foster care system. The testimony below is an example of how cultural capital converts into social capital:

Through a lawyer that I had in foster care and like some CASA advocates were like, “you know you are eligible for Chaffee educational funds?” I was like, “what’s that?” So, they emailed some people. They emailed a foster care nephew who aged out of foster care who was receiving the funds at BRCC and they told them that she should qualify since she is so close to finishing school (Reyah).

It may be essential to note navigating the foster care system and the post-secondary educational system can be difficult if a person is uncomfortable asking for help due to feelings of losing autonomy or control (Cunningham & Diversi (2013). The foster care alumni demonstrated a fair degree of autonomy in this study because they did not want to rely on, or exhaust, the social support they perceived was currently available to them. One participant (Latoya) implied
that her social support was not consistent and when not available, she did not like to impose on others, “I have off and on support. I don’t really like to impose my situation on people.”

In summary, the primary resources accessed by the foster care alumni in this study were the people they had encountered during their experiences while in foster care (foster family, lawyers, counselors, CASA). This revelation was consistent with research indicating that many foster children do not rely on their biological parents to help them navigate the post-secondary education system or help them maintain their motivation to persist through the navigation process (Courtney et al., 2005; Merdinger et al., 2005 as cited in Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Also, some of the participants reported that post-secondary education services such as orientation, advising, and tutoring helped navigate the college system as well. This revelation also suggests policy implications in regard to implementing specific services that meet the unique needs of former foster children entering the college system.

**Theme Four: Financial Resources Addressing Post-Secondary Costs and Concerns**

Most of the participants in this study expressed financial concerns related to post-secondary expenses and living cost. For example, one participant (Colette) indicated, “I stop(ped) going to State School (pseudonym) because the tuition was too high. Even with receiving financial aid.” Another participant (Kaili) reported her challenges with education and living expenses, “I worked full time while I was going to school even with the financial resources from Casey, it was just so expensive to live on your own.” Another participant (Reyah) responded similarly, “Even though I was getting federal aid and outside scholarships, I still needed extra funds to cover State School (pseudonym).”

One commonality among the former foster children is that the majority of them had either a part-time or full-time job to help supplement their college expenses. One participant (Kaili)
reported, “I worked and studied on the weekends.” When describing how she paid for her college expenses, one participant (Latoya) replied, “Working! I’ve always had a job. I officially started working at age 15. My first job was (as) a waitress. Sometimes my friends use to tease me and say I was Jamaican.” Another participant (Reyah) described how she worked two jobs:

I worked. I worked two jobs. Whenever I worked during the holidays, I would get jobs at retail stores. When I was doing summer internships, they would pay. Throughout my college experience, I worked two jobs – like retail stores.

One participant (Kaili) reported that she was a recipient of the Taylor Opportunity Program for Students (TOPS) but lost it due to staying in school too long, “I had to take a lot of fluff courses that I didn’t even need and it was stressful because my help with TOPS eventually ran out and I was so close to finishing.” Another participant (Latoya) described how she lost her scholarships due to challenges of coping with her mother’s death and the rigors of a college schedule:

Honestly, If I can be transparent. I had scholarships and grants because I did so well in school. When the situation (death of mother) kind of homed in on me, grades started deteriorating and money started slipping away and I ended up getting loans. I ended up getting (other types of) financial aid. It’s not the best story but it is my story.

The financial challenges cited from the foster care alumni in this study are typical of Courtney et al. (2010) claiming that significant barriers for pursuing a higher education degree were financial resources, needing full-time employment, needing to support children and family, and needing transportation.

Several of the participants indicated that they received a PELL grant, however, they still borrowed student loans:

The Pell took care of the college tuition and books, but I got student loans to supplement me not working as many hours during college so I found myself getting loans to help pay bills in the house because I wasn’t really able to bring in a lot (Nicki).
One foster care alumnus (Reyah) was able to convert her social capital into financial capital to offset some of her college expenses:

I also have a judge and people from Baton Rouge helping me get sponsorships like to raise money for me every year. I also had scholarships; and if I had a little money left over, like 250, 300 dollars – I think the highest I ever had was 800 dollars, that would support me during the semester.

Four out of the six foster care alumni received a Chafee Educational and Training Voucher (ETV) while in college. However, the participants were informed about the grant in various ways. Here is how one participant (Kaili) described how she received the ETV funding:

The only thing that was not great about that was that you had to stay on top of those people. It was not very consistent like sometimes – like I would eventually get the money but there were times when I would get the money consistently – like you are supposed to get a check every month but sometimes things would happen and I don’t understand why it would happen – I would have to call and eventually I would get my money and then I would get like three checks at one time – it was a weird process but it was helpful.

Another (Reyah) described their experience with the Chaffee grant this way:

I heard about it in my sophomore year. In my spring semester, I got $2,500 and in my junior and senior year, I was able to get the $5,000 every year. I know that I’m still eligible for it, but now that I am at state college (pseudonym), it likes a process, because they never had a foster care student in their program. So, it was difficult to access the funds at first.

As the present study revealed, obtaining the financial capital to cover college-related expenses was a real challenge for the foster care alumni in this study. It appears that working one or two jobs and receiving a PELL grant was the most reliable financial capital for the foster care alumni in this study. Despite the difficulties with college expenses, all of the foster care alumni, except for one, appeared to successfully navigate the financial cost of their post-secondary education by converting their social and cultural capital into financial capital (Perna, 2006; St. John, 2013). To explain this, we learned earlier in this study, that capital is interrelated as well as
interdependent (Fox, 2016). The participants in this study had a variety of social support from lawyers, CASA professionals, college preparatory programs and friends who appeared to be able to provide information regarding financial resources for post-secondary expenses such as the ETV voucher and scholarships (Coleman, 1988).

Also, the majority of the participants had stable housing placements while in foster care. It is this type of stable living condition that transmitted the value of a college degree to a former foster child. Lastly, based on the research on habitus and capital, having placed value on obtaining a college degree is what possibly kept the participants in this study motivated to overcome the difficult financial challenges of obtaining a post-secondary degree (De Freitas, 2017; Perna, 2006; St. John, 2013).

**Theme Five: Gaps in College Expectations and College Readiness**

One finding in this section of the study revealed significant tension among the foster care alumni that resulted from perceiving inadequate assistance with aging out of foster care and with college preparation. More specifically, the foster care alumni reported low level of engagement and lack of information from their case manager. Here is how one participant (Colette) described the relationship with their caseworker, “I rarely saw my caseworker, honestly. Those people stayed in their office. I also hopped from caseworker to case worker too! Every time you looked; you got a new caseworker. The only time they came was to introduce themselves.”

In response to completing their FASFA, one participant (Andrea) reported: “I navigated on my own. I completed my own financial aid packet. My caseworker did not even help me.” Many of the foster alumni appeared frustrated with either being misinformed or not being informed at all about post-secondary financial assistance available to them. In regard to the ETV vouchers, Nicki responded, “No. I never heard that word until you gave it to me. Even as a
DCFS worker.” Colette provided a similar response, “No! What’s that? (Interviewer explains).” An attorney informed one participant (Reyah) about the ETV voucher years after she started college, “I heard about it in my sophomore year. In my spring semester I got $2,500 and in my junior and senior year, I was able to get the $5,000 every year.” Reyah further illustrated her frustration with the misinformation she received regarding financial assistance:

> Even the head supervisor at DCFS dismissed me and told me, “Unfortunately you do not qualify for anything.” I even tried to apply for food stamps. They told me that I didn’t qualify. I found out my spring semester of my sophomore year that I qualified for food stamps as long as I was doing work study. I was like, “what the hell?” I had a terrible experience with DCFS-horrible.

Some of the participants suggested that they did not receive appropriate independent living skills from their case manager, especially as it pertains to post-secondary education. In regard to independent living skills, this is how one participant (Andrea) described the program:

> It was fun, it was a chance for me to experience something outside of the normal foster care home day to day routine. It really did not teach me anything culturally about myself, I had to gain that from socialization of friends in my community.

Another participant (Reyah) suggested that they never participated in an independent living program:

> In my senior year when I was exiting out of foster care, they could have explained what transitional living is – they didn’t even have independent transitional living. I know that other states have like California, Missouri –other states are really progressive. They have foster care until they are like 24 or like once they are 18 they have like their own apartments and they have funds to help them.

In regard to college preparation, some participants did not recall receiving any information from their caseworkers. One participant (Nicki) stated, “I don’t recall anybody talking to me about college in high school. I don’t recall anybody talking about a college plan, but I knew college existed. Another participant (Kaili) pointed out that it would have been helpful for someone to
guide them through navigating their way through college, “I wish somebody had been like okay the day before school you should go to campus and walk around.”

The participants in this study also voiced frustration with the lack of advocacy they received while in foster care. One participant (Reyah) described their appointment with a psychiatrist:

I remember one time my caseworker took me to some kind of psychiatrist, and I told him that I was panicking from anxiety. He diagnosed me with depression. I asked him if he was serious? Why am I getting this diagnosis? Clearly, I have something else going on and the case manager did not do anything.

Another participant (Andrea) described how her foster mother did not advocate for her in school, “My foster mother went along with whatever the teachers said in school. She would always side with the teachers.” The same participant also described how DCFS did not advocate for visits with her biological siblings, “The state did an injustice as it related to me having a relationship with my eight biological siblings.”

The poor delivery of services described by the participants appeared to characterize their position within the field of DCFS. Bourdieu (1972) described the field as a social space where agents continuously compete for field-specific resources so that they can either maintain or improve their position within the arena. In this case, the participants in this study appeared to be vying for knowledge and skills related to financial assistance, independent living, and advocacy (all of which the caseworkers had access to). To what seemed to be an apparent power relation between the foster care alumni in this study and their caseworkers, could very well be tension resulting from neoliberal reform within the field of child welfare. This revelation was consistent with the research literature criticizing how neoliberal policy has impacted the ability of
caseworkers to provide appropriate case management and supports to the children and families it serves (Haley, 2010; Hubel et al., 2013; Smith & Lipsky, 1992).

Another finding revealed that foster care alumni experienced a number of challenges because college personnel were uninformed and had no idea how help foster care alumni navigate the college system. One foster care alumni (Kaili), for example, voiced their frustration with a financial aid advisor who was unaware of the FASFA process for foster children, “I think it is so important for those advisors to understand the application process for foster children because its different with our FASFA’s and stuff some of them don’t know how to do that.”

Another foster care alumni (Reyah) pointed out that her school never had a former foster child in their program and was not aware of how to access financial aid for them:

I know that I’m still eligible for it but now that I am at Grad College (pseudonym), it’s like a process, because they never had a foster care student in their program. So, it was difficult to access the funds at first.

Many foster care alumni also disclosed feelings of alienation and disconnection during their college experience. Some felt out of place because of the stigma associated with foster care. One participant (Colette) described her post-secondary educational experiences as, “Difficult, lost, and basic-basic.” Another participant (Kaili) described their post-secondary experiences as a cultural shock:

So that’s was a huge culture shock because state school (pseudonym) was so different. I remember crying my first years because it was so big, and I was so out of my element. Then that first week of college I was thinking, “What am I doing?” I have never been so overwhelmed in my life. I did not have them and any kind of support from my foster parents because we had had a big fall out, so I was not talking to them my first two years of college. Like it was so big I ended up parking in the parking lot that was the furthest away from my first class. I was so late I was not going to go in.
Another participant (Reyah) described feelings of alienation as well as the stigma associated with being in foster care and the challenges of not having a support system:

I was attending the number one HBCU in America. Most of my Black classmates were middle to upper class. I come from a poor low-income. I came out of foster care and I did not have any income or stuff like that. My environment was low income. I guess I felt out of place like I was a minority. I did not share that I was in foster care. I kept that to myself. The hardest part was not having guidance and support in that area of being on your own. Not having family to go to when you are on break- I did not have enough support in that area.

Even though many of the participants were able to transform their unfavorable habitus towards education to one that values a college degree, it appeared that they continued to remain at a disadvantage because they had no cultural history or identity associated with higher education (Burnell, 2015; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Sullivan-Vance, 2018). Also, it was apparent from the responses of the foster care alumni in this study that the foster care system and the post-secondary education system provided very little support in preparing many of the foster care alumni for college. This revelation aligned with Bourdieu’s claims that when a person encounters a field that they are not a product of, they find themselves “feeling like a fish out of water.”

Despite feelings of alienation, many of the foster care alumni cited how internal actions of the higher education field produced values associated with moral satisfaction, self-esteem, personal development and social interaction (Bathmaker, 2015 p. 73; Maton, 2005). For instance, when asked to describe their college experience in three words, one alumnus (Kaili) revealed how college prepared them for employment:

When it all comes down to it, I would say I was grateful, I grateful for the experience. I think it (college) taught me a lot about the work world. So much you experience in college pertains to how life is going to be in the work world like commitment and seeing things to the end. So grateful, perseverance and stressful.
The three words another alumnus (Latoya) cited were, “uplifting, strength, and unity.” Yet another alumnus (Reyah) described their college experience with these three words, “enlightening, curious, and bittersweet.” One final alumnus (Andrea) described their college experience with these three words, “tough, knowledgeable, and rewarding.” The study revealed that many of the foster care alumni were able to gain positive self-development despite “feeling like a fish out of water.” This revelation supported Okumu (2014) claiming former foster children still conceptualized their transition to college as an opportunity for a preferred identity and a new sense of direction; even though, themes of isolation and abandonment were present due to perceived inadequate support from both the foster care system and the college campus.

**Theme Six: College as a Trajectory Towards Better Circumstances**

It was discovered that many of the foster care alumni transformed their unfavorable disposition toward education because they wanted to create a better life for themselves and for their family:

> I generally looked at my situation and I was always determined to be something in life. I was always motivated deep within my mind to just be better and have a better life for myself as well as for my family. (Andrea)

Some of the participants appeared to transform their habitus toward education because they viewed college education as a way out of a difficult circumstance:

> I’m a non-traditional student. I got married at age 20. I filed for a divorce at 21. So, when I went to purchase things, I could not because all of the credit was in his name. I cried because I did not get paid enough because I didn’t have a college education. So, I went to college. Instead of being a minimum wage worker, that degree brought me more money to support myself and my family. (Nicki)

For one participant (Reyah), a college degree was a way to leave Louisiana, “It was motivation to get out of Louisiana honestly.” These findings validate researchers’ claims that foster children are capable of appraising their life circumstances and that foster children are capable of
constructing conscious decisions to change adverse life circumstances (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Hines et al., 2005; Okumu, 2014).

It was evident from this research study that the experience of being in foster care influenced habitus transformation for many foster care alumni in this study as well as influenced their aspiration to pursue a college degree. Once in college, however, the foster care alumni in this study continually faced many obstacles that could have prevented them from obtaining a college degree, but they appeared to exhibit unique assets to help them overcome these barriers. Yosso’s community cultural wealth model can offer another explanation for understanding how the former foster children in this study transformed their habitus.

Yosso (2005) described community cultural wealth as “an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro- forms of oppression” (p. 77). Yosso (2005) identified six forms of community cultural wealth that often goes unacknowledged within the post-secondary education setting: aspirational, navigational, family, social, linguistic, and resistant capital. By considering the assets exhibited by the foster care alumni in this study, applying Yosso’s community cultural wealth model can help create interventions to assist foster children with transitioning from foster care to college as well as help college administrators and professors accommodate foster care alumni with achieving post-secondary education success.

In regard to aspiration capital, for example, here is how one foster care alumni (Colette) described her desire to pursue a college degree, “I wanted to go to a state school (pseudonym). I always wanted to be an archeologist.” Another participant (Andrea) described her aspiration this way, “I just made up in my mind that I wanted to be the first foster child that my foster mother raised to finish school.”
In regard to navigation capital, the value placed on autonomy and independence when maneuvering systems was resonated with many of the participants in this study. For example, this is how one participant (Kaili) described how she had to track her PELL grant:

I remember that (tracking down PELL) being a challenge because the first week of school I was having a hard time tracking down because I think they accidently sent my grant money to another college and so I had to track that down so that I could pay for tuition and they were like we are going to drop your classes if you don’t pay.

Another participant (Reyah) described how they resolved financial issues this way, “If it was like financial – like I can’t afford to come back to school, I would go to the financial aid office and say ‘look, I need additional funds to help cover this semester.’”

As it relates to familial capital, most of the participants in this study were able to extend family beyond their birth family. Here is how one participant (Latoya) described her relationship with her friend:

Now holidays they are holidays. I spend them with friends and family – kind of spend time with my with friends because my close friend – I am the godmother of her children so I like to spend time with them on holidays and events that they have.

Another participant (Andrea) described her relationship with her foster mother, “Somehow though, my foster mom always comforts me to let me know that she loved me just as her own child growing up.”

As it relates to linguistic capital, one of the participants (Nicki) in this study told a compelling story of how she acted as her own advocate for placement in a foster home and survived foster care:

I never wanted to go to a foster home but the kids there (residential) were cutting themselves and I said to myself, “OH! Hell No! This is not where I’m supposed to be! Find me somebody to live with please!” My siblings were already placed in a foster home and they talked so horribly about it, so I did not want to go, but these kids were cutting themselves and OD’ing; I said find me a house. They found mama. What ended up
happening was a visit was arranged for me to come prior to Superbowl, so it had to be around February. At that meeting, I fell in love with her, and she fell in love with me. I set up a visit myself to come back; I was fifteen. I was fifteen and I set up a visit myself to come to her super bowl party.

Lastly, as it relates to resistance capital, one participant (Kaili) demonstrated the ability to defy the adverse post-secondary outcomes of foster children, “I’m not a quitter, I always wanted to see things to the end, that’s just me personally, that’s how I am. So, I just pushed myself to complete.”

Emerging Themes from the Analysis of First-Generation Students

First-generation college students are generally considered the first in their immediate family to attend college. According to a vast number of researchers, first-generation students share many characteristics of foster care alumni in that they lack insufficient levels of social and cultural capital to navigate the college system successfully. They come from low-income families, attend poor performing K-12 schools, are less academically and financially prepared for college, and they transition to post-secondary education with very little guidance (Cortney et al., 2010; Day, Dworsky & Feng, 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Sullivan-Vance, 2018). Also, similar to foster children, first-generation students do not have parents who have hands-on experience with post-secondary education.

Table 9 displays the results from a semi-structured interview with five first-generation students. Although each of the participants experienced various challenges, all of the participants succeeded in navigating the four-year post-secondary system. Five themes emerged from the analysis: 1) predisposed factors towards post-secondary education, 2) knowledge and values associated with post-secondary education attainment, 3) informal and formal social networks
facilitating post-secondary support, 4) financial resources addressing post-secondary costs, and 5) concerns regarding college preparedness.

Table 9. Summary of Themes for First-Generation Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>K-12 experience, reported academic abilities, perception toward learning, expectation to attend college</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Predisposing factors towards Post-secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school extracurricular activities, values associated with college education, education continuing across generations, college degree associated with human capital</td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Knowledge and Values Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support, friends, friend’s parents, mentor/role models, spouses, community support, teachers, speech therapist, tutors, the internet, college recruiters, advisors, mandatory seminars, orientation, study groups, college clubs and organizations, weekends and holidays</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-secondary Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOPS, student loans, time spent working, spouse</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td>Financial Resources Addressing Post-secondary Costs and Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study skills, parents lack of knowledge, alienated and disconnected</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Gaps between College Gaps in College Expectations and College Readiness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme One: Predisposing Factors Towards Post-Secondary Education**

Similar to the foster care alumni, many of the first-generation students disclosed adverse childhood experiences during K-12. One participant (Sage) described her struggles with Math attending a predominantly White school, “I went to school in Ascension Parish. I went to a
predominantly White school all of my life. I struggled in math. I probably had tutors in math. Math was just not my subject.”

Another (Sophia) disclosed that she was hearing impaired and being raised in a single parent household affected her academic performance:

It’s interesting when I think about it because I failed fifth grade because of the LEAP. Not only the LEAP, but also, I had problems in English and math. Math was the subject that I did well in and throughout time I just thought well maybe English just wasn’t my thing. Because I was brought up in a single parent household, and I could not hear too much, I was very quiet. I want to say, I sort of notice that languages were really my thing and that’s what really brought me out.

One participant (Veda) described her experience attending an alternative school and her experience growing up with a family dysfunction:

When I went to the alternative school, the teachers told me that I didn’t have to be there I just needed to make sure that I signed into the class and I was finished. So, there was no accountability there for me and not having it (diploma), I knew that’s not what I wanted. I knew I had to graduate with a high school diploma but my home circumstances kind of prevented me from doing it because I had a lot of dysfunctional issues going on inside my home and that’s kind of what led me to drop out of high school.

The responses from the first-generation students appear to support research studies claiming both foster care alumni and first-generation students produce low scores on high school math and English standardized tests (Cortney et al., 2010; Day, Dworsky & Feng, 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Despite many of the adversities that many of the participants experienced during their K-12, many of the participants perceived K-12 as easy and shared the belief that they did not struggle academically. For example, one student (Cato) indicated:

I went to a public school most of my life. For a few years I went to a small, private school – like a church school. Other than that, it was all public school. I never had any issues with academics in primary and secondary. I was not a straight A student, but all A’s and B’s and I really didn’t have to try that hard in high school.
Another student (Ramona) added:

In school growing up I didn’t really struggle at school really. When I had surgery on my back, I missed weeks of school and when I went back I kind of just taught myself the information. I never really struggled. In school I never really had to study. The only time I really struggled was in science but even so with that my dad helped me and we pushed through that. I never had any tutors or anything like that.

Although one student (Veda) admitted that she had attention issues, she did not consider it to be an issue:

I wouldn’t say that I really struggled. I would say that I wasn’t attentive enough because I didn’t have that structure in my life. I was a high school dropout. I dropped out of high school and I went back a couple of months after dropping out.

Another finding revealed that many of the participants in this study were very motivated to learn. One student (Sophia) described her enthusiasm towards writing:

And I guess it was kind of my drive to start writing and in 6th grade I started writing more and I used to hear conversations from other people, and I would just write down and it was coming from different environments. You know like people who have more of a vocabulary, you learn from them.

Overall, the first-generation students in this study demonstrated that their disposition towards pursuing a post-secondary education was shaped primarily by the perceived expectations from various sources. For example, one participant (Cato) suggested that it was the social expectation of their peers who influenced them to pursue a college degree:

Right now, it feels like when I graduated, and still today, there is a perception that you have to go to college to be successful and I think that was the largest motivating factor. That, and all my friends were going to college.

Another participant (Ramona) indicated that their family expected them to attend college:
I can say all through high school my focus was I was going to go to school, but I think that was mainly the mainframe that my parents gave me. They told me, “you are going to school,” so by the time I got to 10th or 11th grade, I already had it set in my mind that I was going to college. My parents were like, I had to go to school, there was no other option.

One participant’s (Sage) expectation to attend college was influenced by what appeared to be a robust college going culture in high school, “I guess you would say high school, because they prep you for college. Everything that we did they would tell you that you have to do this in college.”

With the exception of one, the responses from the first-generation students illustrated how social structures outside of the family shaped their college-going habitus. Although the participants in this study attended different types of schools, their overall K-12 experiences appeared to predispose them towards favorable post-secondary education habitus in spite of the difficult K-12 circumstances they endured. This revelation was consistent with Mills’ (2008) claim that education plays a critical role in shaping the habitus of marginalized students and that teachers have the potential to develop either a reproductive habitus or a transformative habitus. This revelation has policy implications regarding the need for primary and secondary education to improve educational outcomes for marginalized students.

Theme Two: Knowledge, Values and Skills Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment

Many of the participants were involved in various extracurricular activities that appeared to align with a college going habitus. For example, one participant (Sage) described a number of extracurricular activities she was involved in:

I played sports. I played basketball and I ran track. I danced in high school. I didn’t do any I did not do many sports in high school; I was in more clubs. I was class president in my sophomore year. I was in BETA. I was in SGA FCA, which was a Christian club.
Another participant (Sophia) added extracurricular activities that focus on job skills, “In high school, I only participated with the yearbook and there was something I participated in where you got work experience in accounting. I also took JROTC. It was mostly in 9th and 10th.”

Although one participant (Veda) disclosed that even though she worked part-time during high school, she still was able to run track, “Well prior to dropping out of school, I did run track. Well, I did cross-country, (it was still track). I also wanted to participate in other sports, but I really couldn’t because I had to work.”

It seemed like the parents of the first-generation students in this study may have benefitted from their children participating in extracurricular activities. As it may be highly possible that extracurricular activities could have played a role in transmitting values and knowledge related to post-secondary education. If so, this revelation was consistent with the research literature claiming that knowledge, as it pertains to college aspirations, can independently be transmitted from schools and student support programs (Brar, 2016; Corwin, 2008; Goldthorpe, 2007; Watt, Norton, and Jones, 2013). It is interesting to note that one student (Sophia) was able to access cultural capital from her friends’ parents. When asked, “who were you learning from,” she replied, “It was friends and the fact that their parents were, I guess I don’t want to say educated, but they could use different words.”

Although the findings in previous studies suggested that families of first-generation students do not have knowledge on navigating the higher education process, the participants’ family in this study appeared to understand the values associated with pursuing a college degree. For example, one participant (Cato) shared how their parent would take away privileges if their grades were unfavorable, “A ‘C’ was unacceptable. I got grounded or my Nintendo taken away or whatever. So, that was my biggest motivation factor to do well in school.” Another participant
(Veda) shared how they plan to pass their values and knowledge associated with college to their children:

So just having that self-gratification of the full experience of college and just meeting people and just the whole experience I would say was my motivation. And now I have kids and I want to be that example to them.

The responses from the first-generation students appeared to illustrate that their parents placed strong values on obtaining a college degree, however based on lack of data pertaining to firsthand experience of the college system, their parents’ knowledge on how to navigate this process appeared to be weak. This revelation supported the research literature claiming that many former foster children enter the college system at a disadvantage because they lack “knowledge, skills, and insider ways of being and doing” (Sullivan-Vance, 2018, p. 58).

**Theme Three: Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-Secondary Support**

As noted in previous sections, social capital is linked to information and resources that could possibly convert to other types of capital. The social capital for the participants in this section also varied. Two of the participants indicated that a parent was their mentor. For example, one participant (Cato) stated his mom was his role model, “I guess the biggest role model for me was my mom.” Another participant (Ramona) added:

My dad is my biggest role model because he worked so hard to provide a good life for us and he was somebody who never quit even when things got tuff, I looked up to him all the time growing up.

Two of the participants in this part of the study reported having tutors in high school. One student (Sage) struggled in math and stated, “I struggled in math. I probably had tutors in math.” Due to a hearing disability, another participant (Sophia) reported receiving tutoring and speech
therapy, “So, I was getting tutors, but then I was seeing a speech therapist.” One participant
(Sage) shared her experience with college recruiters:

When the recruiters came, they gave you like a card and you put your email and stuff on
there and so basically, I just went through the email process. They give you like
instructions on how to enroll into school. So, I used the instructions. And then basically
they reach out to you and you get on the phone with somebody and they instruct you.

One finding revealed that two of the first-generation students in this study obtained
associate degrees prior to obtaining their undergraduate degree. Both of these participants
described the differences in the social capital for both the two-year and four-year institutions. For
example, the first participant (Sophia) initially described her community college experience:

If you are here, this is your beginning and as a first-generation student it was important
for you to be involved and stuff like that. So, by us having those programs, those
mandatory seminars, I was like, “Okay, I need to focus on this,” and I think that’s when I
learned.

Then (Sophia) added:

When I got there (state college), I loved it. Because, I came from a community college
and everybody there had different careers and when I got to state college (pseudonym),
everybody was there to help each other. I was in my major then, so, it was like everybody
was there to help each other. We had study groups. In most of the classes we had a
teacher who taught. We did not have enough teachers in our department, so we had
teachers who taught undergraduate and graduate classes. So, they were kind of teaching
us from a graduate level and they helped so did the students.

In contrast, the second participant (Veda) described the differences between her two-year and
four-year post-secondary experiences this way:

I had to figure that out, because in a community college, you have people who actually
walk you through the process. You have personal advisors that actually walk you through
the entire process. When you get to the four-year college, you are going to swim or sink.
You have to figure it out.
The experiences of the participants in this study who attended a community college before enrolling in a four-year college institution appear to correlate with Day et al., (2013) suggesting that many foster care alumni and first-generation students take remedial courses during their first year of college.

A few participants referenced the Internet as social capital. One participant (Cato) cited Google when reflecting on their college application process, “I just went online and found an application. Google was the best teacher.” In reference to completing a financial aid application, one participant (Ramona) added, “I taught myself. I went on the Internet and I really taught myself.” Once in college, a few of the participants accessed some of the student support services offered. One student (Ramona) identified orientation as helpful when starting college, “When it was time to enroll in classes, I went to orientation and they taught us how to enroll in classes.”

Some of the participants in this study participated in college clubs and organizations. One participant (Ramona) described her experience with joining a sorority as well as other clubs:

They (sorority) kind of helped me out with the inner circle type of things. They knew about certain professors especially going through the process of joining a sorority they told me about what classes I should take because these professors understand what you are going through, they kind of put me into their inner circle type thing. I found out about studying abroad and doing all types of other stuff when I joined. My major is mass communication so they had a club for that so I joined so I joined that and they taught me about the writing center and things like that to help us and resume building courses that taught and showed us that and I went from there.

One participant (Sage) described her experience with clubs related to media, “I joined the newspaper. I started writing for the newspaper. I volunteered at radio stations because that’s when I started to know I wanted to pursue something in broadcast journalism.”

Lastly weekend and holidays with family was reported as a form of social capital. One participant (Ramona) described her school breaks this way:
Every weekend, every holiday, I was going home. By my sophomore and junior year, I was staying up there more because I was making friends and I had gotten a job. I started like having a life away from home.

Another participant (Sage) described her school breaks this way, “For holidays I went home. On the weekends, I was in a small city, so we didn’t do much; but kind of hang out and go to football games.” Yet another participant (Sophia) described their weekends going home after working long hours:

I was working a lot my first two years because on the weekends I would just come home because I was tired because I worked from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm and I would be coming home just tired and it would be from 12:00 to 8:30 and I would be completely tired and it was easy to get to and from like school to home.

**Theme Four: Financial Resources Addressing Post-Secondary Costs and Concerns**

One significant finding in this study was that the majority of the participants spent a substantial amount of their time working as a way to access financial capital. For example, the following participant (Cato) describes how he eventually had to apply for student loans because his work schedule was interfering with his academic progress:

I didn’t do well at all. I lost TOPS then I ended up working full-time to pay for college so I really couldn’t dedicate the time that I needed and basically what my mom said was if you want to graduate you need to make college your priority and at that point I started getting student loans.

Another student (Sophia) revealed that she was working full-time as well:

I was working and then after a while I was working full time. Then I had to cut it down. I made sure that I worked weekends and then I worked half days some days. It was so many days that I worked half days and I had financial aid also so that helped me with the books.

One participant (Veda) implied that they were working full-time and helping their husband take care of their family. For example, when asked, “how you supported yourself financially through
school,” the participant responded, “I worked (a) full-time job and I have a husband.” The academic barriers that the first-generation students in this study experienced as a result of their full-time employment is consistent with the claims of Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld (2017) in that working takes time away from studying as well as time away with engaging peers.

Only one first-generation student (Cato) received a merit-based scholarship (TOPS). However, they lost funding due to not being able to maintain an adequate grade point average: “I struggled greatly with that and I had a really bad GPA. I didn’t do well at all, I lost TOPS.”

Several of the participants in this study disclosed that they took out student loans to pay for various college expenses. A participant (Sophia) described their experience, “When I first stayed on campus because I wanted to be a little closer, so I took out one or two loans the first two years.” It is interesting that none of the first-generation students in this study cited using a PELL grant as a source of financial capital. It appeared that the lack of adequate financial capital could be associated with the lack of adequate social capital. This aligned with research claiming that similar to foster care alumni, first-generation students receive very little guidance in preparing to navigate the post-secondary education system (Okumu, 2014).

**Theme Five: Gaps in College Expectations and College Readiness**

Although the findings revealed that many of the first-generation students in this study did not perceive any academic challenges during their K-12 experiences, the findings did reveal that the participants perceived challenges associated with not being academically prepared for college. A lack of study skills, for example, resulted in significant challenges for this sample.

One participant (Cato) sums up the sentiment overall:

I was willfully unprepared for college but not having to try in high school made it ridiculously complicated for me because I had no study skills whatsoever in high school. Then I got to college and I had to study, and it was ridiculous, so I struggled greatly with that and I had a really bad GPA.
One of the most common challenges that first-generation students spoke of in their interviews was their parents’ inability to provide guidance and academic support as a result of not having any direct experience with attending college. One participant (Ramona) described not having their parents as a means for social support this way, “Being the first generation sometimes that can be hard because nobody else has done it and how can so many people tell you how to do something if they haven’t done it.” Another participant (Sage) echoed the same sentiments, “I felt like my parents really didn’t understand how hard it is because they’re not in college or they did not complete college to understand.” Another student (Sophia) described how they sought out help from outside sources to navigate the college process and to learn about a different grading system from high school:

With family members, being a first generation a lot of people or a lot of your family members may not know the process. When I got to college or before I went to college, I did not understand what a GPA was and why it was important. It helped a lot talking to someone who been through that situation.

A final finding in this study suggested that once many first-generation students enter the field of higher education, they appeared to experience dis-alignment and tension regarding their college-going habitus. This phenomenon could be as a result of a mismatch between the overall expectations of the higher education field and the first-generation students’ overall lack of preparedness for college. One participant (Cato) described feelings associated with not belonging in college:

I failed a single course twice. I was pretty sure I was going to fail it a third time and at that point I was starting to look at other options as far as what to do with my life. There was a lot of times I thought I was not cut out for Engineering I guess I should say, not college.
Another participant (Ramona) described her discomfort with attending a majority White school:

I went to state school (pseudonym), which is a predominantly White university, and coming from ABC school (pseudonym) where I went to high school, which is predominantly Black, I always felt out of place. I was in class with maybe three other Black kids and everybody else was White and it was always a moment where it got uncomfortable especially in college situations where they talk about real world stuff – it could get uncomfortable, but I found my place.

As an older student attending classes with younger students, this participant (Veda) responded:

So, when I went to the four-year college, I mean the whole enrollment process was a little challenging because I didn’t really have anyone to take me by the hand and coach me through the process. I had to feel my way through. Also sitting in the class with students that are like my kids age like the communication was completely off. I don’t know if I’m making sense but that could be a little challenging as well. Because you don’t have a lot of peers your age-Like I said the communication is different. Their reality and my reality are different. They do not have the same responsibility as me.

This revelation showed how first-generation students could overcome conflict with what appeared to be a split with their K-12 disposition towards education and their expectation to attend college. Despite what Bourdieu termed “feeling like a fish out of water,” the first-generation students’ success with navigating the college system aligns with Burnell (2015) demonstrating that when a social agent comes across an unfamiliar habitus, it does not have to result in “clash and conflict“ crisis.

Emerging Themes from the Analysis of Continuing-Generation Students

Continuing-generation students are generally described as students who had a least one parent who obtained a college degree. Researchers claimed that students whose parents graduated from college have advantages in that their parents can help them navigate the college system through their experiences, their connections, and their financial support (Sullivan-Vance, 2018). Continuing-generation students, therefore, generally have a clear understanding of the rules (doxa) as it relates to the expectations of the field of higher education.
Table 10 displays the results from a semi-structured interview with five continuing-generation students. All of the participants had already graduated from a four-year post-secondary institution or was working towards their college degree at the time of the present study. Four themes emerged from the analysis: 1) predisposed factors towards post-secondary education, 2) knowledge and values associated with post-secondary education attainment, 3) informal and formal social networks facilitating post-secondary support, and 4) financial resources addressing post-secondary costs and concerns.

Table 10. Summary of Themes for Continuing-Generation Students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codes</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Expectation to attend college, K-12 experience, perception toward learning, reported academic abilities</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
<td>Predisposing factors towards Post-secondary Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent level of education, high school extracurricular activities, gifted programs, values associated with college education, education continuing across generations</td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
<td>Knowledge and Values Associated with Post-secondary Education Attainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental support, parent’s involvement with registration, friends, community support, mentor/role models, teachers, tutors, guidance counselors, therapist, advisors, orientation, college clubs and organizations, weekends and holidays</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
<td>Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-secondary Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PELL, TOPS, scholarships, student loans, time spent working, parents as financial resources, military as college fees, disability check</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
<td>Financial Resources Addressing Post-secondary Costs and Concerns</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme One: Predisposing Factors Towards Post-Secondary Education

Throughout the interviews, it was evident that the parents of the continuing-generation students in this study had a strong influence on the participant’s motivation to receive a college education. For instance, one participant (Dawn) explained that pursuing a college degree was always an expectation from their parents and not going to college was never considered as an option:

They (parents) were college graduates and went on to get advanced degrees. So, it was pretty much the norm in my family. My grandfather was an educator. He finished college. So, it was pretty much expected, so I never considered not going to school.

Two participants shared similar sentiments regarding their parent’s expectations. The first of these participants (Destiny) stated:

Growing up I knew that for me going to college was never not an option. My option was what was I going to go to school for. That (college) has been very heavily induced in my family. Everybody went to college. Everybody got a higher education and that what was expected of me.

The second participant (Edmond) also added, “Well, that’s what they (parents) tell you to do when you go to school. So not having one or not going was not an option.” Another participant (Felicia) claimed, “My mom. She has her master’s degree plus 30 so college for me was really the only option. I didn’t think of it any other way – she (mom) would push that. One participant (Chance) reflected on how their parents joked about not having a choice in going to college, “My parents, they both went to college and they both graduated. My parents use to joke and tell me I didn’t have a choice.”

Reflecting on their K-12 experiences, three of the participants described learning and academic capabilities closely related to college readiness. For example, one participant (Dawn) described their experiences attending both a private and public school:
I had a good experience my early years. I went to public school in elementary. In junior high I went to a Catholic school. In high school, I went one year to a Catholic school and then I went to a public-school. No, I didn’t struggle academically. I didn’t study like I should have, but I still finished above a 3.0.

Another participant (Chance) described his experiences with attending a predominantly White school in a rural area and a predominantly Black school in an urban area:

I went to two high schools. One was predominantly White, and it was mostly in like a country city. In my last year, I went to a predominantly black school and it was in a bigger city. They were both different. I graduated with a number of 300 I believe. I did not struggle. I maintained at least a 3.0 in both schools. The last school the predominant black one, I had a 4.0 and I was ranked number 12 in the whole class.

This participant (Felicia) described her experience with being in a gifted program at a magnet school:

In high school I was actually in the gifted program. I was in a diversified classroom setting because of the gifted program. Inside the school we had exposure to the traditional setting and the neighborhood kids but in the classroom, there were kids from all over the city – Black, White, Asian – Everybody. I was gifted my whole life – kindergarten through twelfth. I attended a magnet school.

Two of the participants indicated that they struggled in Math; however, they received tutoring to help them understand. One of these participants (Destiny), sums up this sentiment this way:

I always struggled in Math and Science. English and Social Studies came more natural to me. Social Studies was one of my favorite subjects but sometimes I struggled to get through it. English was one of my strongest subjects. When it came to Math and Science, I definitely struggled. My parents put me in tutoring, and they made sure that if I didn’t understand something, they found a way for me to understand it because they knew it was something that I was going to need in the future.

It was apparent that the habitus for the continuing-generation students in this study consisted of a taken-for-granted disposition towards pursuing a college degree, which was primarily influenced by their parents. This revelation is consisted with the research literature
claiming that students raised in the homes of parents with higher levels of education typically view college enrollment as an expectation of their mothers and fathers (Jez, 2014; Maynor, 2011; Sullivan-Vance, 2018; Walther, 2014). The participants’ reported K-12 experiences also appeared to predispose them to skills needed to meet the academic rigor of most post-secondary institutions, such as math, English and study skills. This revelation appeared to be consisted with the research literature indicating that many parents with college experience can often use a variety of strategies to enhance their children’s ability to succeed in schools as the participants in this research study appeared to have attended schools associated with a high college-going culture such as private schools, magnet school and schools with a gifted program (Apple, 2001; Demerath, Lynch, Milner, Peters & Davidson, 2010; Reay, 2004a; Thompson, 2015).

Theme Two: Knowledge and Values Associated with Post-Secondary Education Attainment

All of the participants in this study cited multiple extracurricular activities that were offered through school and community organizations and that they participated in during their childhood. One participant (Dawn) described how active they were in school, “I was very active in school. I participated in multiple (extra)curricular activities. I was on the drill team. I played basketball, I ran track, I worked, and I was homecoming queen. I was very active.” Another participant (Chance) described a similar experience, “I played basketball and ran track, play(ed) baseball. I was in Four-H and then, when I went to the other school, I was in the same three: track, basketball, baseball, and I was in the honor society there.” One participant (Destiny) described how she engaged in activities that were oriented toward intellectual growth:

In elementary school I was a book worm-I stayed in my books. My hobbies were reading and writing. I didn’t play sports or anything. Middle school was the same but in high school I did JROTC. I did student government and I did state meet. I was the type of person who liked to do things that challenge my mind. Things that was social. I wasn’t the type of person who was in sports or things like that.
Unlike the majority of the participants in this study, this participant’s (Edmond) experience with extracurricular activities was engaged through the community:

A few years I played piano as an extra-curricular activity – outside of school piano classes. The only role models I essentially had were when I was going into a youth fraternity-AMT (Alpha Mu Tau). Upper Bound, BRYC (Baton Rouge Youth Coalition), I did a lot of summer camps – I can’t remember the names of them. I was also in Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts.

So far, it appeared that the continuing-generation students in this current research were able to gain knowledge associated with post-secondary education from three sources: the family, the primary and secondary school setting and the community. This revelation appeared to place the participants at an advantage within the field of post-secondary education as it pertained to persistence and retention, which is typical of the research literature in this study (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

The inherited knowledge that the continuing-generation students received from their parents regarding how to navigate the college system, appeared to have placed them in a favorable position within the field of post-secondary education. This aligned with Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory in that continuing-generation students have a better “feel for the game” than their peers who do not have parents with college experience. High levels of cultural capital provided continuing-education students with a history of the game as well as what they could expect within the field while playing the game, therefore, continuing-generation students entered college with greater access to cultural capital than most underrepresented students (Bourdieu, 1977).

**Theme Three: Informal and Formal Social Networks Facilitating Post-Secondary Support**

The findings revealed that attending a school with a high college going culture served as a resource for many the participants to help navigate the college system. This participant’s
Felicia) experience with her guidance counselor, as well as with being in the gifted program, sums up this revelation:

I think the guidance counselors told us when it was time to start applying – they would come in or we would talk about what schools we were interested in. I think they gave us all of our test scores and necessary paperwork that we needed. I think being in the gifted program we had more resources honestly than the traditional program. They really pushed for us to go to college because it’s almost an expected thing.

Many of the participants cited their parents as a primary source of information to help navigate the college system – especially during the registration process. For example, this participant (Destiny) described her experience selecting classes during registration, “I actually had to go up there with my mom and like the people in the office, they just forced me into different classes that I needed and set me up that way.” When asked, how did you know how to navigate the college system, one participant (Edmond) stated, “I asked my mom.” Another participant (Dawn) echoed Edmond’s response, “My mom enrolled me initially by being in touch through admissions.” A few of the participants cited more formal networks such as attending orientation and meeting with an advisor. For example, this participant (Felicia) stated, “I started at LSU and I remember going up there for orientation and just picking random classes.”

Role models and mentors often consisted of parents and family members as reported by the participants in this study. For example, this participant (Dawn) stated that her parents were her role models due to having advance degrees, “My parents were always my role models. They were college graduates and went on to get advanced degrees.” Another participant (Destiny) gave a similar response, “My mother and father were my role models in different parts of my life.” One student (Chance) described his parents as role models in this way, “Really, I guess my parents they both went to college and they both graduated. I just wanted to follow their footsteps and have a college degree as well.” One participant (Destiny) shared their affiliation with a
sorority that she and her mom were a part of and how the women in the sorority placed high values on education:

Women in my mom and my sorority definitely were important to me and helped me throughout my life. They were very instrumental in me seeing what educated Black women looked like and what it looked like to be an exemplar of a hard-working woman maintain your balance, getting your education and doing what you need to do.

Parents and friends were often relied upon to help navigate stressful situations while in college. For example, one participant (Felicia) stated, “I talked to my mom a lot. She was the main person I talked to – just about things, college you know, when I was stress(ed). She would motivate me to keep going.” Another participant (Dawn) responded that she would talk to her “mom and friends.”

A few of the participants extended their social capital as they enrolled in college by participating in college clubs and activities. One participant (Dawn) described her experience with participating in a club associated with her major in college, “Within the college of business I did. We had a club but no Greek organization or anything like that.” Another participant (Chance) echoed a similar experience at his majority White college, “I was in the Black Student Union and the Wildlife Society.”

Out of all the resources available to the continuing-generation students in this study, parents were cited as the most significant source of social capital to help navigate the college system. Whether serving as degree attainment role models or decreasing college related stress, the parents of the continuing-generation students in this study appeared to play a vital role in providing an understanding of the “rules of the game” for navigating the social practices within the field of post-secondary education. Also, it was apparent that the continuing-generation students demonstrated that they were able to extend their social capital network by participating
in extracurricular activities during K-12 and throughout college. This revelation was typical of the research literature showing how capital can be converted into other forms of capital (Jez, 2014).

**Theme Four: Financial Resources Addressing Post-Secondary Costs and Concern**

This current study revealed that the type of financial resources among the used among continuing-generation students in this study varied. One participant indicated that he had a disability and that he was receiving a monthly disability check. For another participant (Felicia), TOPS and scholarships appeared to be the financial resource she relied on to support her college related expenses:

But they (Guidance Counselors) did help a little in regard to getting the process started but after that they helped us when we needed to apply for TOPS and things like that and I did get TOPS. Other than that, I didn’t apply for a lot of scholarships.

Three out of the five participants indicated that they had part-time jobs. Part-time employment, however, did not appear to be a barrier for studying and attending classes. Although many had part-time jobs, the continuing-generation students also cited their parents as sources to supplement their college related expenses as well. One participant (Destiny) indicated that she had odd jobs, but parents helped out mostly, “I would do little Knick knack jobs on campus like doing hair and stuff. My parents would help me sometimes throughout college like give me money.” Another student (Chance) cited his parents, as well as a work study job, as a source of financial capital, “At first my parents and then my second year I got a campus job. After that, I’ve actually got a fast food job in the city.” When asked how you supported yourself financially through college, one participant (Dawn) stated, “I worked part-time, and I received loans. I didn’t qualify for grants, but I received some student loans.”
Overall the findings in this study appeared to suggest that the continuing-generation students did not experience any cost related stress and anxiety associated with pursuing a college degree. This revelation suggested that the continuing-generation students in this study were able to convert their cultural and social capital into financial capital in regard to college related expenses. These findings are consistent with the results of Sullivan-Vance (2018) who claims that continuing-generation students are typically raised in homes with high levels of social, cultural, and financial capital and that students whose parents graduated from college have advantages in that their parents can help them navigate the college system through their experiences, their connections, and their financial support.

### Cross-Case Analysis

This section offers a cross-case analysis of the four cases in this research study. To conduct this analysis, the following sub-questions were answered: RQ2) To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study? RQ3) Is there a gap between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported? RQ4) To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

The researcher returns to the central research question in chapter five, which asks, “What we can learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences in chapter five?” Since RQ5 pertains to implications of
theory, method, and policy recommendations, this question, “What are the theoretical, methodological and policy implications of the research findings,” is also answered in chapter five.

Sub-Question Two: To What Extent, If Any, Do Louisiana’s Foster Care Alumni Report Lower Levels of Social, Cultural, and Financial Capital than First-Generation and Continuing- Generation Students? What Factors Explain Variations in the Types and Levels of Different Forms of Capital for Each Category of College Students in this Study?

The first part of question two asked, “To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural, and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students?” Overall, the findings concluded that foster care alumni did not report lower levels of cultural, social and financial capital than the first-generation and continuing-generation students in this study but rather distinct levels of capital existing between them. However, from a deficit perspective, the study appeared to suggest that the levels of cultural, social, and financial capital that the foster care alumni in this study had access to, did not position them within the post-secondary education field as well as continuing-generation and first-generation students to navigate the college system. Based on their inherited cultural, social, and financial capital, the continuing-generation students in this study appeared to have a better “feel for the game” when navigating the college system. By entering the field with higher levels of cultural capital, the continuing-generation students demonstrated how the social practices of their parent’s habitus self-perpetuated itself within the college system, which is consistent with Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction. The habitus of the continuing-generation students in this study, as a result of higher levels of cultural capital, appeared to match more favorably with the rules and norms of the college system while the habitus of the foster care alumni and first-generation students did not.
The second part of the research question asked, “What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study?” The results from the study are discussed in the following subsections.

**Cultural Capital.** The study revealed that the continuing-generation students in this study received a higher level of parental influence in regard to generating values, knowledge, and skills associated with obtaining a college degree. Foster care alumni and first-generation students in this study did not experience the privilege of family expectations to pursue a college degree, however, they were able to experience unique sources of cultural capital that generated messages regarding post-secondary education, which contradicted many scholars from previous studies who highlighted birth families as the primary source for transmitting cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977; Johnston & Baumann, 2007; Roth, 2000; St. John et al., 2011; Walther, 2014).

The foster care system demonstrated a cultural structure that influenced a desire to change current circumstances for many foster care alumni in this study. Therefore, pursuing a college degree was a trajectory to a better future. Also, the helping nature associated with the culture of caseworkers within the foster care system appeared to influence many of the foster care alumni in this study to pursue degrees in social work. Therefore, the current study revealed that it was not that foster care alumni in this study had lower levels of cultural capital as it relates to values, knowledge, and skills associated with post-secondary education, it was just that their cultural capital was different. However, colleges and universities do not typically value cultural capital different from dominant groups (Leander, 2010; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004).

Although the findings in previous studies suggested that families of first-generation student know very little about navigating the higher education process, the participants’ family in this study appeared to understand the values associated with pursuing a college degree by
stressing the importance of earning passing grades and supporting participation in high school extracurricular activities. Therefore, it appeared that participating in extracurricular activities could have possibly benefited the parents of first-generation students in that these activities generated knowledge, values, and skills associated with a college degree. Nonetheless, the study still revealed lower levels of participation in extracurricular activities among first-generation students and foster-care alumni as compared to continuing-generation students. Although participation in extracurricular curricular activities appeared low among the foster care alumni in this study as compared to the other two groups in this study, this revelation still validates the literature showing stable high school placement, a challenging high school curriculum, and participating in high school extracurricular activities as factors that contribute to resilience and persistence through college (Merdinger et al., 2005).

**Social Capital.** It appeared that social capital existed all across the categories of students in this study, however, the types of social networks varied. The current study indicated that the majority of the continuing-generation and first-generation students relied mostly on informal social networks to navigate the college system: parents, friends, role models, and mentors. The social capital for foster care alumni appeared to include more of a formal social network associated with professionals they encountered while in foster care: mental health therapist, CASA volunteers, attorney judges. It may be worth mentioning that none of the foster care alumni cited their caseworker as a resource for navigating the college system.

Parents served as a vital resource for helping continuing-generation students navigate the college system (especially during registration) as well as for helping solve stressful college-related issues. Parents also served as role models and mentors for the continuing-generation students in this study as well. One possible reason that continuing-generation students identified
their parents as role models could be that their parents had hands-on experience with obtaining a college degree. The findings also revealed a high level of support during weekends and holidays among continuing-generation and first-generation students.

Not surprisingly, the findings revealed that foster care alumni reported lower levels of parental support when navigating the college system as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation students in this study. However, foster care alumni cited their foster parent as a vital role for influencing their college decision and serving as critical support for maintaining motivation to persist through college process. The foster care alumni’s positive connection towards their foster parent appeared to be associated with a stable home and school placement while in foster care, which, therefore, contradicts the research literature claiming foster parents without a college degree, may not encourage or prioritize post-secondary education; therefore, post-secondary education expectations and involvement for foster children in their care may be low (Kirk et al., 2013).

The research study indicated that not all categories of students were exposed to individualized college preparation to help navigate the college system. A few of the participants in each of the three groups cited guidance counselors and tutors as resources for preparing them academically for college. However, it appeared that the continuing-generation students overwhelmingly attended high schools with high college-going culture, which suggested that they were more likely to receive individualized college preparation as compared to first-generation students and foster care alumni. Many of the foster care alumni cited academic and behavioral problems in high school, therefore, it is more than likely that they did not received individualized college preparation from school personnel. Types of high schools attended by the foster care alumni and first-generation students varied. However, all of the groups were similar
in that they shared school placement stability. School placement stability resonated with Merdinger et al.’s (2005) findings identifying a stable high school placement as a factor contributing to foster care alumni’s resilience and persistence through college.

Once enrolled in college, the study found that there were only a few students from each category who took advantage of post-secondary institutional support, such as orientation and academic advising. Also, the foster care alumni did not reveal receiving any specialized services while in college. Continuing-generation students were more likely to participate in college clubs and organizations, following first-generation students and foster-care alumni students were least likely to engage. Foster care alumni and first-generation were more likely to have full-time jobs that prevented them from participating in college activities and seeking out student support services.

Overall, the study concluded that the students across all categories had some type of social support that helped them stay motivated to persist through the college navigation process. However, based on the findings of the current research, the support identified by continuing-generation students appeared to be more favorable for persisting throughout the college system. For example, many of the first-generation students did not have parents with enough college experience to guide them through the college navigation process. Foster care alumni shared this experience as well. Based on their parent’s role in providing an understanding of the “rules of the game” for navigating the social practices of the college system, continuing-generation students appeared to demonstrate higher levels of social capital by being able to extend their social capital network from high school throughout college system whereas foster care alumni and first-generation students did not.
Financial Capital. The current research revealed that having a full-time job to supplement college expenses was common among foster care alumni and first-generation students. However, the amount of time spent working created barriers for academic success and engagement in college activities for both of these groups. This revelation supports the research literature claiming that students from both low socio-economic backgrounds and first-generation students frequently spend a significant amount of time working to supplement college expenses (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld 2017).

Continuing-generation students in this study reported higher levels of financial support from parents as compared to foster care alumni and first-generation students. Higher levels of financial support from grants such as TOPS and scholarships were also cited from continuing-generation students, following first-generation students with lower levels of financial capital cited from foster care alumni. First-generation and foster care alumni were more likely to cite student loans as a financial resource for college as compared to continuing-generation students. The foster care alumni cited the Chaffee ETV voucher as a financial resource for college, but the financial aid was not reliable and was not enough to cover college expenses.

Community Cultural Wealth. The current research demonstrated how cultural, social and financial capital could be viewed as inherently lacking (especially within the education system) if one is not born into a family whose capital is viewed as more favorable (Pringle, 2014). There was an interest, therefore, to explore the cultural capital of the foster care alumni in this study from an alternative theoretical framework. To learn more about the assets of foster care alumni, Yosso’s (2005) cultural wealth model was employed to shift; if possible, the perspectives of capital associated with foster care alumni from a deficit model to an asset-based model (Fox, 2016).
By employing Yosso’s community cultural wealth model, the findings revealed that rather than perceiving the social, cultural, and financial capital of the foster care alumni in this study as a deficit, the cultural wealth of foster care alumni could very well be perceived just as valuable as capital typically favored within the post-secondary education structure. Foster children often endure very difficult circumstances, but they still have a desire to go to college just as their peers who did not experience the foster care system. It is well documented from previous studies, for example, that 84% of foster children desire pursuing a college degree. Therefore, according to Yosso’s community cultural wealth model, foster care alumni possess aspirational cultural wealth. In this study, college aspirations appeared to be just as important for first-generation and second-generation students to persist through college as well.

In regard to navigation capital, the foster care alumni appeared to place values on autonomy and independence when maneuvering both the foster care system and the post-secondary education system. Post-secondary education systems value a student’s capability to exercise independence and self-advocacy as well. Also, the foster care system strives for independent living skills as it relates to foster children exiting out of the foster care system. In regard to familial capital, most of the participants in this study were able to extend family beyond birth family as they maintained positive contact with their foster parent, mental health counselor, CASA volunteer and attorneys. Most of these people had firsthand knowledge regarding navigating the college system and appeared to be able to transmit their knowledge to the foster care alumni the same ways that parents of continuing-generation students appeared to transmit knowledge to their children.

Also, as it relates to linguistic capital, many foster children often have experience with multiple systems: foster care systems, education systems, and the court systems. Also, they are
familiar with the various lingo for each system they encounter. For example, in regard to the foster care system most foster children are familiar with terms such as aging out, case plans, and emancipation. In regard to the court systems, most foster children are familiar with terms such as permanency plans, family reunification, and independent living programs. When they enter the college system, foster children adapt to lingo such as work-study, pledging, and dead week. Lastly, in regard to resistance capital the foster care alumni appeared to have defied claims that illustrate low post-secondary educational outcomes associated with foster children.

The foster care alumni in this study demonstrated a range of cultural capital that apparently initiated knowledge and motivation to persist towards a college degree. The present study suggests that rather than transmitting the values of dominant groups, it may prove useful for the foster care and educational systems to identify the unique skills and knowledge of each foster child to create effective support for post-secondary success.

**Sub-Question Three: Is There a Gap between the Types and Levels of Various Forms of Capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services Report Foster Care Alumni Receive and What They Get? If so, What Are the Gaps Reported?**

Research studies show that foster children aging out of the foster system do not typically have the same safety nets and social supports as their peers who never experienced foster care (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Access to resources and information, therefore, is vital to a successful transition out of the foster care system.

The responses from the interviews suggested that caseworkers served as the weakest ties to social capital as foster care alumni referenced low level of engagement and receiving little to no information associated with post-secondary education from their assigned caseworker. Based on the interview responses, the disposition and values of the caseworkers and the foster care
alumni in this study appeared to cause a gap between college expectations and college readiness, which validated the findings of Unrau et al. (2010) claiming that there is a gap between the customs and practices of the foster care system and a foster youth’s academic, social and financial preparedness for college.

Although many of the foster care alumni in this study reported poor delivery of services as it pertained to obtaining knowledge to navigate the post-secondary system, the research findings showed that none of the caseworkers in this study appeared to perceived college preparation skills as vital for foster children transitioning out of the foster care system. Typical responses revealed that rather than post-secondary education, the caseworkers in this study valued self-sufficiency skills such as cooking and balancing a checkbook as necessary for transitioning out of the foster care system. This finding validated claims that post-secondary education preparation and outcomes are seldom a priority among child welfare workers (Bruskas, 2008; Davis, 2006; Day et al., 2012; Foster Care to Success, 2013).

One key finding in this study appeared to suggest that a meritocratic approach combined with a climate of low expectations for foster children to pursue a college degree could very well influence what types of social capital caseworkers transmit to foster children in terms of independent living skills and post-secondary education. For example, the study revealed that the majority of the caseworkers in this study were well informed about the Chafee ETV vouchers, a voucher that provides financial support to foster children pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree. However, many of the foster care alumni did not recall learning about the voucher from their caseworkers. One foster care alumnus claimed that they did not hear about the funding until their second year of college. Most alarming is that one caseworker who also identified as a foster care alumnus in this study, indicated that they never heard of the Chafee ETV voucher.
The results of this current research study appeared to also suggest that if a foster child produced low grades and school suspensions, assumptions of not being motivated to pursue a college degree could possibly exist within the foster care system. If there is a climate of low expectations to attend college, a caseworker could also withhold information regarding college preparation as well. However, in regard to foster children, it is well documented that many factors influence low educational outcomes, such as multiple homes and school placements and trauma (Day, 2011). Therefore, a climate of low expectations among caseworkers could result in foster children internalizing the possibilities of their life circumstances as limited (Hine et al., 2005; Kirk et al., 2013; Unrau et al., 2012).

Lastly, the current research implied that power imbalances currently exist between foster children and caseworkers within the foster care system. Based on the responses from the interviews, the current study revealed sources of tension existing among the foster care alumni in this study as they perceived knowledge and skills withheld from them pertaining to college readiness and independent living—all of which the caseworkers in this study had access to. Withholding information could largely attribute to the unconscious assumptions held by meritocracy views that the caseworkers demonstrated in this study. If true, the meritocracy views held by caseworkers could result in foster children currently in the foster care system perceiving that it is their fault that they are unprepared for college when being unprepared for college is typically due to circumstances beyond their control (multiple homes and school placements, trauma). These unfavorable dispositions towards a college degree could lead to misrecognition and symbolic violence towards foster children currently in the foster care system as it was evident in this study that the foster care alumni’s position within the child protection field was one that could be perceived as powerless and as the “natural order of things.” The findings in this
study, therefore, supported Wiegmann (2017) claims that a habitus oriented in power often leads to foster children perceiving themselves as powerless, especially when child welfare workers limit life possibilities and opportunities.

    It is essential to note that the majority of the foster care alumni in this study were able to bridge the gap between college aspirations and college readiness by accumulating essential sources of support made available to them through the foster care system. From an asset perspective, the foster care alumni in this study created opportunities for social and cultural capital by drawing on support from foster parents, CASA volunteers, attorneys, and judges. Therefore, the foster care alumni demonstrated that they were able to consciously exercise agency towards their life circumstances by not allowing the structure of the foster care system to govern a cycle of social reproduction well intended for foster children (uneducated, welfare, incarceration, unwed pregnancy). These findings validated researchers claims that foster children are capable of appraising their life circumstances and that foster children are capable of constructing conscious decisions to change adverse life circumstances (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Hines et al., 2005; Okumu, 2014) and contradict claims of determinism (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Mills, 2006; Reay, 2004b).

*Sub-Question Four: To What Extent Do Colleges and Universities Offer Programs and Services Aimed at Supporting the Unique Needs of Foster Care Alumni?*

    Key components of college support programs generally consist of a range of post-secondary educational support: scholarships, housing, mentoring and academic support (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Many colleges and universities, however, typically do little in meeting the unique needs of youth that age out of the foster care system as the college support programs meant to serve this population are often grouped with first generation-students and at-
risk students (Corwin, 2008; Dworsky & Perez, 2010). Although, many of the foster care alumni in this study pointed out several types of emotional, social and financial challenges that they experienced while navigating the college system, a crucial element missing from their responses was a clear reference to involvement with college support programs designed explicitly to assist former foster children with persistence, retention and college completion.

The current research revealed that services such as orientation, student advisement and tutoring were helpful in navigating the college system, however, very few of the foster care alumni in this study used these services. Based on the responses from the interviews with the participants in this study, many of the foster care alumni described challenges associated with not knowing how to navigate the college system, poorly timed or inadequate amounts of financial aid, and uninformed college personnel who could not adequately accommodate their post-secondary educational needs. Many of these challenges were also reflective for first-generation students in this study as well, which resonated with the claims that similar to foster care alumni, first-generation students receive very little guidance in preparing to navigate the post-secondary education system college and that administrators who implement support programs perceive foster care alumni as a subclass of first-generation students and they often fail to see the unique challenges of foster care alumni transitioning to college (Cortney et al., 2010; Day et al., 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

First-generation students and foster care alumni in this study were more likely to work full time jobs to cover college related expenses as compared to continuing-generation students. Although many of the foster care alumni in this study received some type of financial aid (Chafee ETV voucher, PELL, TOPS or student loan), the financial aid for many of them were inconsistent or not enough to cover all of their college expenses. As a result of juggling a full-
time job with a college class schedule, both foster care alumni and first-generation students indicated that they struggled with passing classes or had to change their status to part-time, which also resulted in losing the financial aid they were offered. For some students the shift from full-time status to part-time status extended the amount of time required to complete a college degree.

Also, due to perceived lack of social support, many of the foster care alumni and first-generation students described feelings associated with alienation and isolation. Not many foster care alumni and first-generation students in this study participated in college clubs and organizations as compared to continuing-generation students. The social capital identified varied among the first-generation students and most of them could not fully rely on those resources to help navigate the college system. First-generation had families to rely on to maintain motivation and persistence to navigate the college system even though their family did not have first-hand experience with the college system as well. None of the foster care alumni in this study had parents to support them through the college process as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation students.

Most prevalent among the foster care alumni in this study was how they described feelings associated with the stigma of being a former ward of the state. The study revealed that the experience of foster care often led to autonomous decision-making and isolation due to not wanting to deal with the discomfort of being a ward of the state. During semester breaks and holidays, for example, some of the foster care alumni pointed out that they had limited resources in terms of where to live as compared to first-generation students and continuing-generation students. Also, adding to the challenges of insufficient social capital, the foster care alumni in this study pointed out that, at times, college personnel were not familiar with the unique needs of
the foster children and could not adequately accommodate their needs. The unique challenges described by the foster care alumni supported Cunningham and Diversi’s (2013) claims that foster children leave the foster care system not prepared for independent living as they typically experience economic and employment challenges, difficulty connecting with others, housing instability, a loss of social support, and pressure to be self-reliant.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter revealed the findings of a multiple comparable case study. The first part of this section described four cases, which displayed the demographics and characteristics of the participants in each of the four cases. Following the introduction of the four cases in this research study, a within-case analysis was conducted that displayed several common themes that emerged from interviews, coding, and data analysis. Each of the four cases highlighted the voices and four-year post-secondary experiences of three categories of college students: foster care alumni, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students. This research study also highlighted the voices of DCFS caseworkers and their experiences with transitioning foster children from foster care to independent living as well.

Overall, the themes and the findings in this current research study validated previous research demonstrating that foster care alumni are positioned at a disadvantaged navigating the post-secondary education field as compared to first-generation students and continuing-generation students. However, there were some instances where the data in this section contradicted those claims. Despite the various K-12 challenges that foster care alumni in this study identified, the research study demonstrated that the majority of the former wards of the state could consciously transform an unfavorable habitus towards education to a college-going one. Once in college, however, many of the foster care alumni experienced unique challenges
when navigating the college system but none of them participated in any college-support programs tailored to meet the specific needs of former foster children. Lastly, research sub-questions two, three, and four were answered to enable the researcher to conduct a cross-case analysis of the research data. The findings from this analysis was utilized to answer the central research question and sub-question five in Chapter Five.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND FINAL REFLECTION

So if a college education is indispensable, the challenge as I see it is how to make it more accessible.

— E. Gordon Gee
The Promise of American Higher Education

The purpose of this multiple case study was to explore the four-year post-secondary educational experiences and perceptions of Louisiana foster youth students, first-generation students, and continuing education students within the context of Pierre Bourdieu’s interrelated concepts of habitus, field, and capital. This current study conducted a cross-case analysis to address three research sub-questions: (1) To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study, (2) Is there a gap between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported and, (3) To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

In this final chapter, the findings of the cross-case analysis were used to answer the central research question, “What can we learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?” The answer to the central question highlights a discussion of the current research study findings as well as summarize the findings related to sub-questions two, three, and four. The implications of this current research study address research sub-question five, “What are the theoretical,
methodological, and policy implications of the research findings?” This chapter also explains the limitations of the study, followed by suggestions for future research. The chapter closes with a final reflection.

**Discussion of Key Findings**

**Overview**

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction provided a theoretical framework to demonstrate how certain groups of people can reproduce themselves within various social structures from one generation to the next and his theoretical constructs of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence described the reproduction process of social inequality and exclusion, especially as it pertained to education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu defined habitus as deeply ingrained patterns of behaviors, skills, and dispositions that are primarily inherited from family but can also be acquired from education and other social structures as well (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu described the notion of a field as a social space where agents struggle or compete to obtain resources such as goods and services as well as power (Leander, 2010; Maton, 2005). Capital is the number of valued resources that social agents possess to either maintain or increase mobility within a social space. Bourdieu put forth three major interrelated types of capital: cultural, social, and economic (Fox, 2016). Lastly, Bourdieu coined the term symbolic violence to illustrate a hidden form of domination and unjust conditions that are perceived by marginalized groups as the natural order (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

The Bourdieusian concepts of habitus, field, capital, and symbolic violence were helpful in understanding the similarities and differences among the four-year post-secondary educational experiences of the three groups of students in this current study. This section discusses key findings in relations to the central research question of the current research study, “What can we
learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?”

**Habitus.** People tend to perceive opportunities and aspirations based on the circumstances of their habitus (Maynor, 2011; Walther, 2014). To summarize, habitus is a subconscious worldview based on a person's upbringing (i.e., social class, education). The college-going habitus for continuing-generation students, for example, appeared to be influenced from within the context of their family structure. It was apparent that the habitus for the continuing-generation students in this study consisted of a taken-for-granted disposition towards pursuing a college degree as the study revealed that their college-educated parents played a significant role in fostering their post-secondary education opportunities. This revelation demonstrated Pierre Bourdieu's social reproduction theory in that it showed how certain groups of people reproduce themselves within various social structures from one generation to the next. Also, this revelation is consistent with the research literature claiming that students raised in the homes of parents with higher levels of education typically view college enrollment as an expectation of their parents (Jez, 2014; Maynor, 2011; Sullivan-Vance, 2018; Walther, 2014).

Bourdieu linked sports metaphors such as “feel for the game” to describe how an agent subconsciously perceives their ability to navigate a social environment successfully (Reay, 2004). Continuing-education students in this study attended primary and secondary schools with a high college-going culture where they were predisposed to academic rigor similar to post-secondary institutions. Since the current research revealed that the parents of continuing-generation students in this study had first-hand knowledge on how to navigate the post-secondary system, it was not surprising that when compared to first-generation students and
foster care alumni, the habitus of continuing-generation students demonstrated a better “feel for the rules of the game” for navigating the college field. This revelation resonates with claims that college-educated parents extract their resources to create a range of strategies so that they can intervene in their children’s educational outcomes (Apple, 2001; Demerath et al., 2010; Reay, 2004a; Thompson, 2015).

While college-educated parents impacted the college-going habitus for continuing-generation students, first-generation college students in this study appeared to have a college-going habitus influenced primarily by a K-12 educational structure. Even though the study revealed that parents of first-generation students placed strong values on obtaining a college degree, the study observed that their knowledge on how to navigate the college system was weak compared to parents of continuing-generation students. First-generation students in this study revealed predisposing factors prompting college aspirations mainly from educational experiences such as having involvement with high school extracurricular activities, having a positive attitude towards learning, and having perceived academic abilities. This revelation was consistent with Mills (2008a), who argued that education played a critical role in shaping the habitus of marginalized students.

According to Bourdieu, when the habitus of a social agent encounters a social setting that they are not a product of, the experience feels like a fish out of water (Dalal, 2016). Many first-generation students in this study described what appeared to be a split between their K-12 disposition towards education (not having to study hard), and the realities and expectations of post-secondary education institutions (study skills, time management skills). Consequently, many first-generation students in this study cited post-secondary academic and social barriers that led to experiencing what Bourdieu termed “feeling like a fish out of water.” However,
consistent with Burnell (2015), first-generation students in this present study demonstrated that when a social agent comes across an unfamiliar habitus, it does not have to result in a “clash and conflict” crisis. Despite the obstacles described, first-generation students in this study were successful in persisting through the navigation of the college system.

In contrast to a college-going habitus influenced by a family or an education structure, the current study found that foster care alumni developed a college-going habitus that was primarily influenced by unfavorable social conditions associated with aging out of the foster care system. The majority of the foster care alumni in this study described adverse past life experiences such as parental neglect and negative K-12 educational experiences that impacted their disposition towards education unfavorably. Wanting to change current circumstances and wanting a better life for themselves and family, however, produced a sense of autonomy that restructured a disposition that did not align with a college-going habitus to one that did, a process that Mills (2008) described as transforming the habitus. A transformative habitus, according to Mills (2008), is one that “recognizes the capacity for improvisation and tends to generate opportunities for action in the social field” (p.7). By demonstrating individual agency to attend college, the foster care alumni in this current study proved that difficult life circumstances do not have to constrict someone educationally. This revelation, therefore, contradicted a primary argument from critics claiming that Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus is deterministic and does not leave room for change (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Mills, 2006; Reay, 2004b).

Similar to first-generation students, foster care alumni also reported experiences associated with “feeling like a fish out of water.” This alienation was mostly due to not being academically and socially prepared for college. Despite reported feelings of alienation, the foster care alumni in this study described how the internal actions of the higher education system
produced values associated with moral satisfaction, self-esteem, personal development, and social interaction (Bathmaker, 2015 p. 73; Maton, 2005; Smith, 2015; Watt, Norton, & Jones, 2013). This final revelation was conclusive of Okumu (2014), showing how former foster children still conceptualized their transition to college as an opportunity for a preferred identity and a new sense of direction; even though, themes of isolation and abandonment were present due to perceived inadequate support from both the foster care system and the college campus.

The study found that the caseworkers in this study were prone to a habitus influenced by an ideology of meritocracy that resulted in a climate consisting of low expectations for foster children to attend college. Meritocracy is a widespread American belief system that equates working hard (motivation) with success. Even though research has demonstrated that many factors, such as multiple homes and school placements affect educational outcomes for foster children (Day, 2011), the current study found that motivation was still a vital trait that caseworkers felt was necessary to provide post-secondary education support to foster children. The current study suggested that if a foster child produced low grades due to circumstances beyond their control, a caseworker could perceive that child as not motivated to pursue a college degree and, therefore, withhold information regarding college preparation.

Lastly, the notion of habitus explained power imbalances that often exist between caseworkers and foster children due to the child’s reliance upon their caseworker. Consequently, many of the foster care alumni in this study perceived this sort of relationship as a barrier for navigating their way to adult independence (Wiegmann, 2017). The current research study concluded that a habitus influenced by meritocracy as well as a habitus oriented in power resulted in a gap between college expectations and the foster care alumni’s overall preparedness for post-secondary education. This revelation aligned with the research literature claiming that
foster care alumni hold a disadvantage in the field of education because they do not have access to the same level of resources as their non-foster care peers (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

**Field.** The field is considered a social space where social agents with different expectations and habitus interact. Pierre Bourdieu compared the interaction between social agents within a field to a competitive ball game where each arena generates its own rules and social norms (Leander, 2010). All fields have unique formal and informal “rules of the game” for interacting, making choices, and for securing positions within each social arena (Naidoo, 2005; Maton, 2005). Bourdieu highlighted these subconscious “taken for granted” understanding of the world as doxa (Leander, 2010). Within a field, a social agent struggles to conserve or transform his or her status and perceives their advantages and possibilities based on their inherited resources (Dalal, 2016; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). The present research study focused on two sorts of social fields: the child welfare field and the post-secondary education field.

The present study described The Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) as a hierarchical social field structured with two primary actors: caseworkers positioned at one end of the field and foster children positioned at the other. Bourdieu et al. (2012) implied that in order to gain understanding into the present state of the child welfare field, researchers must take into account how the concept of neoliberalism affects the way caseworkers meet the needs of the children they help. Neoliberalism is an economic, political, and social form of capitalism characterized explicitly as the free market (Harvey, 2005; Winslow, 2015). Also, neoliberal policies tend to favor private enterprise and individual responsibility as opposed to public service (Harvey, 2005). It appeared that bureaucratic regulations influenced by neoliberal conditions restricted social mobility within the child welfare field for both caseworkers and foster care
alumni in this study. Therefore, to what seemed like an apparent power relationship between foster care alumni and their caseworkers, could have possibly been tension resulting from neoliberal reform within the child welfare field (Garrette, 2010; Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012).

Also, the research overwhelmingly found that the rule of the game (doxa) for preparing youth to age out of the foster care system was to outsource independent living programs. Independent living programs appeared to be another ramification of neoliberal restructuring and efforts to increase efficiency and manage cost within the child welfare field as well. The study found, however, that the concept of independent living proved to be ambiguous for both the foster care alumni and caseworker as the focus on self-sufficiency proved misleading. Caseworkers, for example, struggled to facilitate services within the constraints of a deficit-based structure that, historically, was not intended to transition children into adulthood as the primary focus of child protection is safety. On the other hand, foster care alumni struggled within the constraints of the child welfare field to obtain knowledge and skills related to financial assistance, independent living, and advocacy (all of which the caseworkers had access to). This revelation was consistent with the research literature criticizing the way neoliberal policy has impacted the ability of caseworkers to provide appropriate case management and supports to the children and families it serves (Haley, 2010; Hubel et al., 2013; Smith & Lipsky, 1992).

Lastly, the study indicated that caseworkers within the child welfare field valued helping people. The study’s findings suggested that a professional habitus centered around support for social justice and public welfare could result in a cultural mismatch for caseworkers when providing services to foster children within the constraints of a bureaucratic neoliberal structure. This revelation aligned with Garrett (2010), claiming that working in a neoliberal context often
produces tension among caseworkers within the child welfare field because they follow two masters: those whom they want to help (foster children) and the administrators who create the bureaucratic practices for the state.

Within the field of higher education, the rules for access is to pass entrance exams, pay for living and college expenses, and to pass course work. With the global marketization of the post-secondary education field, however, the infringement of heteronomous principles drawn from the economic and political fields have sensed eroded a high degree of autonomy that colleges and universities enjoyed for over the past two decades (Bathmaker, 2015; Colley, 2014; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004; Naidoo et al., 2011). Since then, the impact of heteronomy has resulted in a rapid expansion and a diverse hierarchy of post-secondary institutions within the higher education field: two-year community colleges, four-year public institutions, four-year private institutions, and for-profit institutions (Eckel & King, 2004; Bathmaker, 2015; Naidoo, 2005; Maton, 2005; Tsiplakides, 2018).

The current study found that the habitus of the continuing-generation students matched more favorably with the rules and norms of the college system while the habitus of the foster care alumni and first-generation students did not. Foster care alumni described challenges associated with not knowing how to navigate the college system, poorly timed or inadequate amounts of financial aid, and uninformed college personnel who could not adequately accommodate their post-secondary educational needs. Also, the present study noted that college support programs designed explicitly to assist former foster children with persistence, retention, and college completion were a crucial element missing from the foster care alumni’s post-secondary experiences. The study did reveal, however, that foster care alumni exhibited unique cultural assets that helped them navigate the college system successfully. Unfortunately, research
has shown that colleges and universities do not typically value unique cultural assets that are
different from dominant groups such as continuing-generation students (Leander, 2010; Maton,

Similar to first-generation students, the study found that foster care alumni experienced a
mismatch between their overall preparedness for college and the overall expectations of the post-
secondary education field. Many of the barriers that first-generation students experienced with
navigating the post-secondary education field were reflective of foster care alumni as well. Due
to discovering similarities in post-secondary experiences, it was not surprising to find that the
research reflected a taken-for-granted norm within the post-secondary education field that the
educational capabilities of foster care alumni are similar to first-generation students (Cortney et
al., 2010; Day et al., 2013; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco, 2014). First-generation students in this
study, however, had families to rely on to maintain motivation and persistence to navigate
through the post-secondary education field even though their family did not have the first-hand
experience with the college system. None of the foster care alumni in this study had parents to
support them through the college process.

Lastly, Day et al. (2013) argued that many foster care alumni and first-generation
students take remedial courses during their first year of college and that taking remedial college
courses within the first year of college is problematic because underserved students drop out of
college within their first year of enrollment. Nevertheless, several participants from this study
disclosed that they attended a two-year community college as a pathway to completing a four-
year post-secondary education degree with the implication that they were not academically,
emotionally, nor financially prepared to attend college after graduating from high school. Also,
the students in this study cited their community college experiences as more affordable and as
having more one-on-one interactions with the staff. The findings suggest, therefore, that rather than competing for higher rankings, enrollment, and recognition of legitimate knowledge within one higher education field; community colleges and universities can engage in a collaborative effort to develop a pathway program for foster care alumni who require more social and financial support with obtaining a four-year degree.

**Capital.** Bourdieu argued that the success of a social agent depends on the amount of resources that they have access to (Fox, 2014). Bourdieu identified three valued sources of capital that agents typically struggle to improve their position within a field: cultural, social, and financial. Cultural capital is the inherited message and knowledge about a particular issue that is transmitted from a family, social, or educational structure (Walther, 2014). Social capital is a network of relationships that provide information about resources and about a particular subject (Walther, 2014). Financial capital is money and financial assets, and symbolic capital is prestige (Walther, 2014). According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural, social and economic capital are interrelated as well as interdependent (Fox, 2016). It is conceivable, therefore, for one form of capital to convert into another form of capital (Reay, 2004a).

The messaging centering around college expectations was strongest for continuing-generation students in this study. The study revealed that continuing-generation students in this current research gained knowledge associated with post-secondary education from three sources: the family, the primary and secondary school setting and within their community. Parents served as the most vital source of knowledge in regard to informing continuing-education students how to navigate the college system. Also, it appeared that attending schools with a high degree of college-going culture such as private schools, magnet school and public schools with a gifted program generated strong messaging regarding college as continuing-generation students were
more likely to receive vital information from guidance counselors and college recruiters. Additionally, the study found that continuing-generation students as a whole were more likely to participate in high school honor courses and extracurricular activities and to get involved in college organizations as well.

First-generation students did not have parents to rely on to transmit knowledge regarding how to navigate the post-secondary education field, therefore, messaging centering around college expectations were obtained predominantly from social structures outside of the family. Similar to continuing-generation students, first-generation students in this study attended high schools with a high degree of college going cultural as well. Participation in extracurricular activities appeared to play a central role in transmitting messages and knowledge related to post-secondary education for first-generation students. The study concluded that the K-12 educational structure influenced college expectations for first-generation students and this revelation aligned with the research literature claiming that knowledge, as it pertains to college aspirations, can independently be transmitted from schools and community support programs (Brar, 2016; Corwin, 2008; Goldthorpe, 2007; Watt et al., 2013).

For foster care alumni, the messaging and knowledge centering around post-secondary education opportunities appeared to transmit from a structure made up of low expectations to attend college and from a structure where foster children received little to no information associated with higher education. Wanting to change adverse life circumstances played a critical role for foster care alumni in this study, in which obtaining a college degree was perceived as a trajectory to a better future. Internal factors such as having the determination to pursue a new sense of direction raised a conscious decision for most of the foster care alumni in this study to change unfavorable social conditions associated with aging out of the foster care system (Hine,
It is interesting to note that the helping (or lack thereof) nature associated with the culture of the foster care system appeared to influence many of the foster care alumni in this study to pursue degrees in social work and to pursue careers with child protection. The findings pertaining to how foster children obtain messages and knowledges about post-secondary education resonated with Mills (2008a) claiming that based on how an agent is perceived, marginalized students have the potential to develop either a reproductive habitus (one that reads the future that fits them) or a transformative habitus (one that generates opportunities). Another interesting finding was that foster children in this present study appeared to have stable home placement, in which many identified their foster parent as transmitting messaging around post-secondary education even though there were no experiences with college.

The study found that the social capital used to persist through the college navigation process varied across the categories of students in this study. For example, the majority of continuing-generation and first-generation students relied on informal social networks to navigate the college system: parents, friends, role models, and mentors. Foster care alumni appeared to rely on formal social networks linked with professionals they encountered while in foster care: mental health therapist, CASA volunteers, attorney, and judges. Caseworkers, however, served as the weakest ties to social capital as foster care alumni referenced low level of engagement and receiving little to no information associated with post-secondary education. Also, the findings revealed a high level of support during weekends and holidays among continuing-generation and first-generation students but not for foster care alumni. Continuing-generation students were more likely to participate in college clubs and organizations, following first-generation students and foster-care alumni students were least likely to engage.
Students across each category identified student services programs such as orientation, academic advising, and tutoring as helpful when navigating the post-secondary education field. However, college support programs designed explicitly to assist former foster children with persistence, retention, and college completion were not identified in this present study. The finding suggest that many colleges and universities do little in meeting the unique needs of youth that age out of the foster care system as the college support programs meant to serve this population are often grouped with first generation-students and at-risk students (Corwin, 2008; Dworsky & Perez, 2010).

The financial capital to cover college-related expenses appeared to be a real challenge for both foster care alumni and first-generation students in this study. As the present study revealed, working one or two jobs and receiving a PELL grant was the most reliable financial capital for foster care alumni and first-generation students. Foster care alumni cited the Chaffee ETV voucher as a financial resource, but the financial aid was not reliable and was not enough to cover college related expenses. Continuing-generation students in this study did not appear to experience any cost related stress or anxiety associated college expenses. Higher levels of financial support from grants such as scholarships and TOPS were cited from continuing-generation students, following first-generation students with lower levels of financial capital cited from foster care alumni. This revelation suggested that the continuing-generation students in this study were able to convert their cultural and social capital into financial capital as a way to cover college related expenses. These findings are consistent with the results of Sullivan-Vance (2018) who claimed that parents of continuing-generation can help them navigate the college system through their experiences, their connections, and their financial support.
Consistent with Furquim et al. (2017), the current study found that first-generation and foster care alumni were more likely to cite student loans as a financial resource for college as compared to continuing-generation students. Lastly, first-generation students and foster care alumni revealed losing financial aid such as TOPS because juggling full-time jobs either resulted in having to change their student status to part-time or resulted in taking more time to complete college. This revelation supported the research literature claiming that students from both low socio-economic backgrounds and first-generation students frequently spend a significant amount of time working to supplement college expenses (Pratt, Harwood, Cavazos, & Ditzfeld, 2017).

Implications and Contributions

As the momentum increases to expand post-secondary success for foster children, the findings in this research study contribute to the scholarly literature examining ways to level the four-year post-secondary education playing field between foster care alumni and their non-foster care peers. This section will address many essential implications that expands the results of this study as well as answer the fifth sub-question in this current research study, “What are the theoretical, methodological, and policy implications of the research findings?”

Theoretical Implications

Applying Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of practice and social reproduction adds insight to understanding why some groups enroll and persist in four-year post-secondary institutions and why some do not (Burnell, 2015). The findings in this study generated a number of important theoretical implications for building on existing literature addressing foster children and post-secondary education and for offering key recommendations for policies and future research.

Implicit in Bourdieu's theory is the idea of neoliberal reform within the child welfare structure and how it leads to tension for both DCFS caseworkers and foster children for the
independent living model proved misleading (Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Garret 2010). The study revealed that the rule of the game (doxa) for transitioning children from foster care to independent living involved outsourcing to independent living programs, but foster children continued to need support after they exited the foster care system. Therefore, the study implies that there is a misrecognition associated with a taken-for-granted attitude that independent living programs prepare foster children for self-sufficiency, and as a result, they will no longer incur a cost to the state. The results and implications in this study agree with what researchers have highlighted about foster children demonstrating how unprepared they are when aging out of the foster care system (Courtney et al., 2017; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012; Okumu, 2014; Propp et al., 2003; Rios & Rocco, 2014; Schelbe, 2011).

Another implication of Bourdieu’s theory stems from the vital role that cultural, social, and financial capital plays in shaping a college-going habitus and in advancing social mobility within the four-year post-secondary education field (Burnell, 2015; Dalal, 2016; Fox, 2014; Leander, 2010; Maton, 2005; Mills, 2008; Naidoo, 2004; Reay, 2004b; Smith, 2017). The study proved that if a foster child exhibits behavioral problems or produces poor grades, the education or child welfare system could perceive a child as not motivated to pursue post-secondary education and, therefore, withhold information and resources geared towards college preparation. The research findings, therefore, implies that education and child welfare practitioners unknowingly perpetuate a degree of symbolic violence against foster children when they withhold information and resources about a college degree. When this type of symbolic violence is enabled, foster children have the potential to perceive that they are the blame for not being prepared for college when being unprepared (multiple school placements, overrepresentation in special education, trauma) could have resulted from circumstances beyond their control. The
findings of the research confirmed Bourdieu’s theory claiming that social structures such as education and child welfare unconsciously construct power imbalances as a result of a meritocratic ideology (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu et al., 2012; Dalah, 2016).

Critics of Pierre Bourdieu claim that his theory is deterministic and does not leave room for change (Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Mills, 2008a; Reay, 2004b; Sullivan, 2002). However, the research findings revealed that habitus is not deterministic and that agents have free will to change adverse life circumstances. The foster care alumni in this study illustrated that difficult life circumstances do not have to constrict someone educationally, which implies that foster children are capable of individual agency to construct conscious decisions about their future and to attend college. Nevertheless, the research found that a foster child can transform an unfavorable habitus towards education to a college-going one. These findings contribute to the ongoing scholarly debates connected with structure versus agency as the research findings show that foster children have the potential to act as agents of change and not allow social structures such as the education and child welfare systems to govern a cycle of social reproduction well intended for children who grew up in foster care.

Yosso (2005) also criticized Bourdieu’s theory claiming that it placed too much emphasis on obtaining the values, norms, and belief systems of dominant groups, which implies that post-secondary education systems are not aware of the unique cultural knowledge and social relations of foster children. As a result of implementing Yosso’s cultural wealth model, the research highlights a range of culturally rich capital that foster care alumni employ to their advantage so that they can persist towards a college degree. Applying Yosso’s cultural wealth model has significant implications for child welfare practitioners, K-16 staff, and public servants addressing
the needs of foster care alumni as the model has the potential to approach the needs of foster children from an asset perspective as well as transform policies to target the unique abilities that foster children make use of when transitioning from foster care to college completion.

**Methodological Implications**

This study sought out to compare the four-year post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni with first-generation and continuing generation students. I analyzed qualitative empirical data gathered from observations, in-depth interviews, and coding words and phrases. One significant implication of a qualitative approach is that it captured the voices of foster care alumni’s experiences with transitioning from foster care to a four-year post-secondary education institution, which aligns with the worldview of critical constructivism. Although Bourdieu advised avoiding debates regarding quantitative versus qualitative, a quantitative approach would not have aligned with the epistemology and ontology of the research as it would have only assumed one reality. The study found that the narratives told by the foster care alumni provided a deeper understanding of how the child welfare and K-12 education structures influence four-year post-secondary educational aspirations among foster children as well as how foster care alumni navigate through the post-secondary education system.

Employing Bourdieu’s constructs of habitus, field, and capital also supports the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of critical constructivism, which has key implications for future scholarly research as well. Pierre Bourdieu emphasized privilege, power, and inequality throughout his scholarly work (Dalah, 2016) and, therefore, his theory was useful for demonstrating the way foster children are disadvantaged while completing a four-year degree as compared to first-generation and continuing-generation college students. Although the research study considers the strength of Bourdieu’s theory, the theory implies a deficit model for
conceptualizing the post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni. Bathmaker (2015) and Tsiplakides (2018) drew attention to the fallout of institutional diversity and competition as the concept of widening participation within one post-secondary education field could result in social stratification among marginalized groups. Therefore, when applying Bourdieu’s theory, scholars may want to take into account social stratification issues among foster care alumni when investigating who goes where - community college, university (Bathmaker, 2015; Tsiplakides, 2018).

In contrast to Bourdieu’s theory, I observed that applying Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model had key benefits. First, the model was applied to investigate whether or not it could be modified to assess the cultural strength of foster care alumni post-secondary experiences as opposed to only people of color. By Applying Yosso’s cultural wealth model, the research study discovered that foster care alumni possess a wealth of cultural experiences and social relationships conducive for successfully navigating the four-year post-secondary system. Secondly, previous research has focused on the challenges and barriers of foster care alumni pursuing a four-year post-secondary degree (Day, 2011; Day, Dworsky, Fogarty, & Damashek 2011; Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Courtney et al., 2010; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014). By extending Yosso’s model to a broader framework than was intended, this research has the potential to fill a gap in scholarly literature highlighting unique cultural assets that foster care alumni employ to navigate the post-secondary education system.

Finally, the qualitative data from this research study contributes to the existing qualitative literature regarding foster care alumni and four-year post-secondary education. Drawing upon both Pierre Bourdieu’s theory and Yosso’s cultural wealth model has practical methodological implications. Bourdieu’s theory has the potential to provide a clearer understanding of how
negative dispositions towards education are cultivated among foster care alumni and how these dispositions can be transformed to align with a college going culture. Yosso’s cultural wealth model could be useful for future researchers wanting to examine how foster care alumni employ their existing capital to persist through four-year post-secondary degree.

**Implications for Policy and Practice**

This research study contributes to the scholarly literature in that it builds on existing data illustrating why foster care alumni have the lowest graduation rates from four-year post-secondary institutions out of any other subgroup of underprivileged youth. Also, the research findings do not only have a policy and practical implication for child welfare, secondary and post-secondary education, and state government officials in the state of Louisiana but also have a policy and practical suggestion for these institutions on a national level as well. The findings in this research could contribute to national debates surrounding social reproduction among foster children as it relates to inequalities and how to improve retention and graduation rates for children who identify as former wards of the state.

**Department of Children and Family Services**

The study revealed a climate of low expectations that exists within the child welfare system for foster children to enroll and persist through the rigors of a four-year post-secondary education. Due to meritocracy ideology, the research study proved that there is a gap between the customs and practices of the foster care system and a foster youth’s preparedness for college. Moreover, the results from the research agree with scholars suggesting that the foster care system does little in preparing foster children for post-secondary education because of its overall goal to keep a foster child physically safe (Dworsky & Perez, 2010; Okumu, 2014; Rios & Rocco 2014; Unrau et al., 2012). These findings have critical policy implications for future child welfare
practices. The results from the current research could provide new insight into the relationship between foster children and caseworkers as the work in this inquiry showed that caseworkers served as the weakest ties to social capital.

Caseworkers in this study demonstrated that they relied on independent living programs to provide skills such as cooking and budgeting for foster children aging out of the foster care system. The reliance on independent living programs to provide these types of skills implies that caseworkers may overemphasize self-sufficiency among children aging out of the foster care system. The data from the research, however, showed that foster care alumni were able to bridge the gap between the practices of child welfare and college readiness by employing the support of formal networks such as CASA volunteers, attorneys, counselors, and judges whom they manage to stay in contact with after they exited out of the foster care system. These observations are positive for transition case planning in that the policy implications for exiting a child out of foster care could potentially shift the emphasis from self-sufficiency to interdependence. The work from this study could be useful for existing polices extending formal and informal social support to foster care alumni in the state of Louisiana who are older than eighteen (Propp et al., 2003; Cunningham & Diversi, 2012). Also, the findings have national policy implications for extending foster care beyond eighteen for all foster children in the United States.

The study provided evidence that knowledge, values, and skills associated with a college degree are not just exclusively transmitted from biological families but can also transmit from informal and formal social networks as well (Brar, 2016; Corwin, 2008; Goldthorpe, 2007). Therefore, the data implies that caseworkers and independent living programs have the potential to help level the playing field within four-year post-secondary education institutions by providing youth aging out of the child welfare system with information essential for navigating
the college system (Sullivan-Vance, 2018). These findings have many important policy and practical implications for coordinating efforts between child welfare, independent living programs and the education system to provide assistance with college preparation such as college application, financial aid and class registration.

The study also confirms previous research that identifies a stable high school placement, a challenging high school curriculum, participating in high school extracurricular activities, and social support as factors contributing to post-secondary values, knowledge, and skills (Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014). Most of the foster care alumni in this study disclosed that they experienced stable school attendance and participated in extracurricular activities such as ROTC, Beta Club, and college preparatory programs while in foster care. Participating in extracurricular activities in high school has the potential to expand social and cultural capital for pursuing a college degree. This data has implications for primary and secondary teachers as well as child welfare workers in that the findings can be useful in shaping a college-going habitus for foster children (Bourdieu, 1977; Mills, 2008a).

The study found that many of the foster care alumni in this study pursued degrees in social work and careers with child protection. This interesting observation appears to indicate that the helping (or lack thereof) culture associated with child welfare has significant influence on the children they serve. In addition, foster parents proved to be a vital source of cultural capital for influencing college aspiration. Therefore, implicit in the messaging centered around post-secondary education aspirations is placement stability for not any of the foster care alumni claimed that they experienced placement disruptions while in foster care, which is not typical of the scholarly literature (Day, 2011; Dworsky & Courtney, 2010). This observation has
implications for pre-service and in-service training for foster parents and professional training for case workers.

Lastly, the study found that caseworkers placed a high value on helping people, but they struggled to facilitate services as the concept of independent living proved to be misleading for both caseworkers and foster care alumni. Therefore, the research finding suggests that the helping nature of caseworkers could result in a cultural mismatch between caseworkers and a deficit model for teaching self-sufficiency. This finding has implications for high turnover within the child welfare system as it indicates that there is a high need for policy changes resulting from neoliberalism and state disinvestment in social programs that undermines the caseworker’s ability to provide appropriate case management and supports to the children and families they serve.

**Four-Year Post-Secondary Institutions**

The study proved that foster children have the potential to transform an unfavorable habitus towards education to a college-going one. Also, the study demonstrated that foster children have the potential to reproduce their altered disposition by passing down their cultural, social, and economic capital to their children as well. A key aspect of the current and prior research suggests, therefore, that closing the post-secondary education gap between foster children and their non-foster care peers could transform the economic growth for the state of Louisiana, as foster care alumni will be less reliant on the welfare system and less involved with the prison system. The study, as a result, affirms Burnell (2015) claims that habitus can transform and when a habitus changes, the transformed habitus can reproduce. This finding has relevant implications for developing comprehensive post-secondary education initiatives and programs specifically tailored for foster children aging out of the foster care system.
The research also demonstrated that compared to continuing-generation students, foster care alumni were at a disadvantage in knowing the rules for navigating the college system because they had no cultural history or identity associated with higher education (Burnell, 2015; Edgerton & Roberts, 2014; Sullivan-Vance, 2018). On the other hand, however, the research found that as a unique group, foster care alumni possessed existing cultural wealth that they could employ to advance social mobility within the post-secondary education field. This research finding is relevant for primary and secondary schools, higher education institutions, and Louisiana state officials as these structures may want to take into account foster children’s existing capital when considering policy and practical implications for leveling the post-secondary education playing field.

The study observed that two-year community colleges were gateways for some students to obtain a four-year college degree. This finding has economic implications for foster children who lack financial capital to attend a four-year post-secondary institution. Also, this observation has implications for four-year colleges and community colleges as the findings suggests that entering into partnerships can provide opportunities to create strategies for widening participation in higher education among foster care alumni. Collaborating could be one way of absolving tension generated within the higher education field as there would be less focus on economic competition and social exclusion (Bathmaker, 2015; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004). If so, this confirms researchers claim that heteronomy and autonomy can coexist within a social field as well be beneficial for post-secondary education students such as foster care alumni (Bathmaker, 2015; Maton, 2005; Naidoo, 2004).

Policy and Practice Recommendations
The present study demonstrated that foster children lack the social, cultural, and financial capital to successfully navigate the four-year post-secondary education field as compared to continuing-generation and first-generation college students. The research study provides recommendations that can not only apply to child welfare and educational systems in the state of Louisiana but can also apply to various structures across the United States that work with foster children as well. The findings in this study, therefore, support a multiple systems collaboration between child welfare systems, K-16 education systems, and federal and state policy systems to develop practical strategies and policies that could help level the playing field between foster care alumni and their non-foster care peers. Collaboration with a variety of systems could vastly decrease tension among caseworkers and foster children as options for transitioning from foster care to college are not solely reliant upon Independent Living Programs.

Additionally, child welfare and education leaders may want to examine existing power imbalances as it pertains to the relationships between foster children and professionals within its hierarchical structure. Placing value on the norms and beliefs of dominant groups could lead foster children to internalize low expectations of them. Therefore, caseworkers, educators, and student service professionals may want to reflect on the social structure of their habitus during their day to day practices so that they can avoid contributing to the reproduction of social inequalities among foster children.

Most importantly, the foster care alumni in this study demonstrated a range of cultural capital that prompted knowledge and motivation to persist towards a college degree. Rather than transmitting the values of dominant groups, it may prove useful for child welfare and educational systems to identify the unique skills and knowledge of each foster child to create effective support for post-secondary educational success. Also, the child welfare and education system
may want to reframe from applying a deficit-oriented approach when addressing the post-secondary education needs of foster care alumni. Therefore, both of these institutions may want to consider an asset-oriented approach, such as Yosso’s Community Cultural Wealth (2005) and offer training on how to best apply Yosso’s (2005) Community Cultural Wealth Model when creating strategies to support positive post-secondary education outcomes.

Next, child welfare agencies and K-12 systems may want to consider St. John, Hu, and Fisher’s (2011) Academic Capital Formation (ACF) to address the gap in post-secondary education attainment that exist between foster children and their non-foster care peers. St. John (2013) introduced the concept of academic capital formation as “the knowledge needed for a successful transition through the educational process, from initial engagement in education through completion of advanced degrees for professionals” (pg274). By building upon Pierre Bourdieu’s construct capital, St. John (2013) argued that comprehensive and cohesive policies centered around social, financial, and cultural capital could improve post-secondary education access and persistence for underrepresented students (Winkler & Sriram, 2015).

St. John et al. (2011) generated six social processes needed to aid underrepresented students in overcoming barriers to post-secondary achievement: 1) concerns about cost, 2) supportive networks, 3) navigation of systems, 4) trustworthy information, 5) college knowledge, and 6), family uplift. St. John (2013) stressed the importance of facilitating these particular social processes while the student is in high school. Caseworkers, however, may want to consider employing these social processes when developing a transition case plan for foster children exiting out of the foster care system to college. Additionally, case workers may also want to consider collaborating with primary and secondary education sectors, post-secondary school systems, and independent living programs to implement the case plan as well.
St. John et al. (2011) indicated that to further facilitate college aspirations, foster children need to overcome concerns about the cost of a post-secondary education by being aware of the financial aid that is available to them (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). Child welfare systems should include in its practices, a policy requiring Independent Living Programs to provide transitional support surrounding post-secondary education funding during its service delivery. The child welfare system should assure that Independent Living programs are transmitting information about PELL grants and the Chaffee ETV education voucher as well as providing information on the college admission process, tuition, books, and college living expenses. Ongoing training/seminars should be made available on current state and federal post-secondary education funding to support foster care alumni. The following professionals should attend training informing of financial aid available for foster children: child welfare professionals, Independent Living Program coordinators, high school guidance counselors, and college financial aid advisors.

St. John et al. (2011) broadly described the social processes “supportive networks,” “trustworthy information,” and “navigation of systems” as a valued resource that generates useful information to facilitate specific actions that would have been difficult to obtain otherwise (Dagny, 2013; Tzanakis, 2013). To ease concerns over social mobility within the post-secondary education field, foster children will need to secure reliable connections and information as a means for college-readiness, retention, and graduation. Child welfare leaders need to collaborate with both the K-12 and post-secondary education sectors to assure that a foster child receives adequate pre-college experiences during elementary and high school that involves extracurricular activities, pro-active counseling, and tutoring. Also, beginning in elementary, foster children should participate in college tours and pre-college summer programs. Outreach to recruit
mentors through college clubs and Greek organizations should be a collaborative effort between child welfare, the primary and secondary school sectors, and Independent Living Program coordinators. A college mentor can help ease the transition from foster care to college. Outreach to student services specifically college recruiters should also be a collaborative effort by Independent Living Programs coordinators, high school counselors, and post-secondary education institutions as well.

The social processes “college knowledge,” and “family uplift” was derived from Pierre Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory of habitus, capital, and field (Bourdieu, 1972). St. John (2013) described these social processes as overall knowledge of higher education systems and encouragement to overcome the reproduction of social class inequalities in the field of higher education (Winkler & Sriram, 2015). The findings in this current study proved that foster children were more likely to have successful post-secondary education outcomes when they experienced home and school stability. For foster children to perceive that they can go beyond their college aspirations, the child welfare system must find ways to improve home and school placement stability. During pre-service and in-service foster parent training, child welfare leaders may want to include training on the college application process and college funding for foster children and also provide information on how to incorporate a college-going culture within the foster home.

Smith (2017) found that engaging foster children in envisioning future possibilities could be used as a form of cultural capital to influence post-secondary education aspirations, increase optimism, and broaden a subjective sense of agency among foster children (Hitlin & Johnson 2015; Smith, 2017). Also, Watt et al. (2013), found that participating in college support programs affects foster care alumni in three domains: 1) redefining identities, 2) respecting
autonomy, and 3) utilizing assets. The child welfare system, therefore, may want to offer training/seminars to its staff, foster parents, and counselors on evidence-based activities such as pre-college imagination, taking part in games that promote college knowledge and participating in college support programs. These activities could help deviate foster children from their past adverse experiences as well as expose foster children to alternative worldviews (Smith, 2017).

Lastly, researchers have argued that colleges and universities typically consider foster care alumni as a sub-population of first-generation students. However, the findings in the research support the implementation of a comprehensive college program specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of foster care alumni. Appendix B illustrates a list of states that currently offer a comprehensive four-year college support program as well as an example of what each program provides for former foster children enrolled in post-secondary education. Child welfare and post-secondary education leaders should consider coordinating their efforts to develop a specific program that includes trained staff who understands the unique challenges of foster care alumni.

Most comprehensive programs include the following components: “planned transitions-to college,” “year-round housing,” “financial aid,” “one-stop centers,” “academic advising and career counseling,” “Personal guidance and counseling,” “opportunities for student community engagement and leadership,” and “employment support throughout college and after college.” Most college support programs include a “designated leader” to networks with colleges and communities to assure that foster care alumni receive the necessary resources needed to improve post-secondary outcomes (Cohn & Kelly, 2015; Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Foster Care to Success, 2013).
Based on the findings of this study, there needs to be a comprehensive program that not only follows the groundwork of the models listed in appendix B but should also include other components in the program as well. Additionally, a comprehensive college support program should include an asset-based perspective to acknowledge the existing capital of foster care alumni. A comprehensive college support program that includes an asset-based perspective can shift the perceptions of foster care alumni from a deficit view to one of survival and perseverance (Watt et al., 2013). Therefore, college support programs should celebrate the achievements of foster care alumni when they successfully navigate the college system. Actions such as social events, as well as disseminating newsletters on personal development and success, could increase self-efficacy, optimism, and a sense of pride (Hitlin & Johnson, 2015; Smith, 2017; Watt et al., 2013).

Also, the research findings in this study support a comprehensive college support program that includes a component for linking students to community colleges. Colleges and universities can partner with community colleges to help foster care alumni with more in-dept college preparation relating to English and math. Developmental English and math class could assist some foster care alumni with their trajectory to four-year post-secondary education institutions.

Limitations of the Study

The multiple comparison case study proved valuable for providing insight into the post-secondary experiences of foster care alumni as compared to first-generation and continuing generation students. Although the research findings proved significant for contributing to the existing literature on foster children, the research acknowledges that the study is subject to limitations. Researchers may want to take into account the limitations when interpreting the
findings of this study and for conducting future scholarly research on foster care alumni and post-secondary education.
Due to the interpretative nature of the qualitative research design, several sampling limitations impacted the generalizability of the research’s findings. A purposeful sampling approach, for example, limited generalizability to a broader population of foster care alumni as the recruiting process targeted only former foster children with four-year post-secondary education experience. The sample of foster care alumni who volunteered for this research were all African American females; therefore, a sub-population of African American foster care alumni limited the research study in that the findings do not reflect the general population of former foster children. Moreover, the research findings cannot generalize to child welfare systems in other states because the case study is bounded within the Louisiana. Lastly, the findings of the research cannot generalize to all foster children because the sample of foster care alumni in this current study did not experience disruptive/multiple home and school placements. This final limitation is significant because stable home and school placements are not typical of previous literature describing the experience of foster children (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010; Day, 2011; Day et al., 2013; Merdinger et al., 2005; Rios & Rocco, 2014).

Another research limitation to consider is the time constraint for collecting data. The researcher used open-ended surveys and phone interviews to collect data for the research because it was convenient for the participant’s schedules. Face-to-face interviews could have depicted the participant’s verbal and non-verbal cues relating to any distress or excitement experienced while gathering data. Face-to-face interviews could have also provided an opportunity to gather more in-depth follow-up data from the participant’s responses. Therefore, limitations on the scope of the data collection process exist due to not having the advantage of engaging in face-to-face interviews with the participants, which could have led to the researcher misinterpreting some of the research data.
The current research bounded four-year post-secondary education institutions to its case study; therefore, the findings in the research cannot generalize to all post-secondary institutions such as community colleges and vocational colleges. The research limitations also include a dearth of research that extends Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and St. John’s Academic Capital Formation (2011) to foster care alumni. The scarcity of literature on Yosso’s Cultural Wealth Model (2005) and how it can apply to foster care alumni limited prior knowledge in the literature review on the cultural wealth of foster care alumni. Also, the scarcity of literature on St. John’s Academic Capital Formation Model and how it could apply to foster care alumni limited prior knowledge in the literature review on how the social processes could better prepare foster care alumni for college as well.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

This study sought out to explore the four-year post-secondary education experiences of foster care alumni through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu. There is a lot to learn about the post-secondary outcomes of foster care alumni; therefore, expanding the scholarly research in this area could potentially enhance the knowledge of the child welfare system, secondary and post-secondary systems, and political systems. This section offers several recommendations for future scholarly research.

First, the study did not take into account the participant’s age, gender, race, or family status when recruiting a sample of foster care alumni for this current study. Therefore, researchers may want to take into account learning more about the post-secondary education experiences of a specific sub-population of foster care alumni through the lens of Bourdieu’s constructs of habitus, field, and capital. To complement this research, scholars may also want to take into account a quantitative approach with a larger sample of foster care alumni to produce a
more generalizable result for all former foster children with four-year post-secondary experiences.

The current research does not include foster care alumni who did not attend college. Therefore, another area for future research is college choice. Researchers may want to consider a longitudinal design that focuses on how college choice impacts the social reproduction of college-going values among foster care alumni and their children. The research findings from this type of study can potentially provide a deeper understanding of how foster children pass down values and dispositions to their children based upon the habitus shaped while in foster care. This research could inform current educational policies for foster children as well as provide a more in-depth understanding of how post-secondary education impacts foster care alumni and their families.

Many of the youth in this study maintained a certain level of contact with someone whom they met while in foster care. Future research may want to continue to build on research examining how social capital impacts foster children’s transition to independence. Also, future research may want to explore the experiences of foster parents, CASA volunteers, mentors, and professionals who are considered vital in working with foster children and how these relationships help shape the habitus of foster children. This research could help gain insight as to how the personal interactions of key individuals help foster children achieve positive and negative outcomes with their transition from foster care to independent living. Additionally, given the importance of placement stability for foster children, there is a need for more qualitative case studies to address why some people become foster parents and why some do not as well as address foster parents' perceptions of the child welfare system and foster children.
Findings from this type of research could potentially improve child welfare’s screening process for foster parents.

This research suggested that Yosso’s *Cultural Wealth Model* and St. John’s *Academic Capital Model* could improve post-secondary outcomes for foster children. By building upon the two models to include a sample of foster children, a qualitative or quantitative design could prove valuable for increasing knowledge about foster care alumni’s post-secondary education outcomes. Also, researchers can bridge a gap in the scholarly literature on the cultural wealth of foster care alumni and how St. John’s (2011) social processes prepare foster children for college.

Winkler and Sriram’s (2015) developed a psychometric scale to measure academic capital among former foster children. The psychometric scale includes all six of St. John et al.’s (2011) social processes: 1) concerns about cost, 2) supportive networks, 3) navigation of systems, 4) trustworthy information, 5) college knowledge, and 6) family uplift. By using this scale, the research could examine more deeply foster children’s K-12 experiences as it relates to college preparation. Also, research in this area could have practical and policy implications for state systems that work with foster children.

Researchers may want to explore the strengths and weaknesses of existing comprehensive college support programs to examine which program could work for improving post-secondary education success for Louisiana’s foster care alumni (See Appendix B). Also, child welfare leaders and state officials may want to revisit Louisiana Revised Statute 17:1687 that provides tuition and fee exemptions for foster children who wanted to pursue a post-secondary education (HCR 94, 2016). Child welfare leaders and state officials may want to address questions such as: Why was Louisiana Revised Statute 17:1687 never funded? In what
ways can the state of Louisiana implement a comprehensive college support program to meet the unique needs of foster children?

Early in 2019, the governor of Louisiana signed into legislation a bill to extend foster care until age 21. Youth Village is a non-profit program that awarded the state of Louisiana a three-million-dollar grant to implement the YVLifeSet model. The YVLifeSet model provides intensive case management services to foster children electing to stay in the foster care system past eighteen years old. Research in the area of how the model affects post-secondary education outcomes for foster children participating in extended foster care is needed. The findings from this research can provide insight for not only improving the practices of Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services for transitioning foster children from foster care to independent living but can also provide insight for improving post-secondary outcomes for Louisiana foster care alumni as well.

Final Reflection

My interest in the foster care population in conjunction with four-year post-secondary education span back to my years working for a non-profit organization that provides case management services to children from the state foster care system and to children from a private foster care agency. I often felt mixed emotions when a foster child on my caseload was preparing to exit out of foster care. I welcomed a relief from the demands of my caseload, but I also worried because I knew once a foster child emancipated out of foster care, they would face many challenges on their path to becoming a successful, productive adult. This worry was out of concern for knowing that resources in Louisiana are limited in regard to adequately assisting foster youth with adult independent living. Many of the foster children who I worked with and who chose to transition from foster care to college, experienced many unique challenges. For
many, this challenge frequently resulted in producing poor post-secondary outcomes despite the financial assistance they received from federal resources such as PELL and the educational training voucher (ETV), a grant from the John Chafee Federal Program (Chafee). I often reflect on two youths who were on my caseload because it was their experiences of being in foster care and pursuing a four-year college degree that resonated with me. Their experiences greatly influenced my decision to learn more about the barriers that prevent foster children from achieving post-secondary educational success. For the sake of confidentiality, I will refer to these two youths as Bria and Damon.

Bria, a Black female, came into foster care because one of her parents had mental health issues. She had no contact with the other parent. While in foster care, Bria had multiple home placements. She attended a private high school so that she could receive extra educational support in a small classroom environment. After she graduated from high school, she voluntarily elected to stay in private foster care so that she could receive the educational and job training scholarship that the private foster care agency provided. Because she was considered a scholarship recipient, she was required to make a face-to-face contact with me once a month to discuss her educational process. She could have come into the office more often if she needed, but many of the youth who were her age and older rarely contacted their caseworker more than what the terms of the scholarship required. During her monthly visits to the office, I would hear about the challenges she was incurring as an undergraduate student at a four-year post-secondary institution where she was enrolled. Bria felt that she had to work full time to supplement the money she was receiving from her scholarship and financial aid. Even though she was strongly advised not to, I later discovered that she had received student loans so that she could purchase a car to get back and forth from work. For Bria to declare her desired major, she had to pass a state
test. She took the test three times before giving up and losing interest in pursuing her college degree any further. Bria attended a historically black college for almost eight years before deciding not to complete her undergraduate degree. Bria reached out to me a year ago to inform me that she had obtained an online degree in social work. I was proud that she was able to persist and to finally get her degree, but once again, my worry surfaced as I wondered how much student loan debt she accrued while obtaining her online degree.

Damon, a Black male, came into foster care after witnessing his mother shot to death. Damon attended a public high school where he played football. He was a strong student, and he graduated from high school summa cum laude. Damon had a strong support system with his biological aunt and uncle while he was in foster care. After he graduated from high school, however, he lost that support from his aunt and uncle. Damon also elected to stay in private foster care after graduating from high school. He attended a predominantly White state college in Louisiana for three years. During his third year of college, Damon felt that he needed to take care of his younger siblings who had just exited the foster care system at the time. He got a full-time job, moved out of the dormitory, and secured an apartment for him and his siblings. His grades began to drop due to the extra responsibilities of a full-time job and the responsibilities of taking care of his siblings. Eventually, Damon was placed on academic suspension, and he lost his scholarship. After that, I lost contact with Damon. I often wonder what his life is like now.

As I continue to reflect on my experience working with foster children pursuing a college degree, I often question how solid the support for foster care alumni who is trying to navigate the college system. I feel that scholarships and grant money are important; however, because of the adversity that foster children experienced in their past, I often questioned whether it is enough to produce successful post-secondary outcomes? I asked a well-known scholar who is known for
her research in foster care, what did she feel was missing in the research regarding foster care and higher education. She indicated that college support programs for foster youth are a result of doing what “sounds right” and that there is a need for more studies on which particular college support programs work. I agree with this scholar, however, I also believe as a researcher, we must first listen to the voices of foster care alumni who desire a college degree and hear what they feel are the necessary supports that they need for achieving post-secondary educational success.

This qualitative study makes a significant contribution to the scholarly literature on foster care alumni because it provides a better understanding of the college-going experiences of students who grew up in the Louisiana foster care system. The research study gave meaning to their perceptions of how cultural, social, and financial capital impacted their four-year post-secondary educational trajectory as well. I am hopeful that this research can potentially play a role in helping child welfare, education, and political leaders inform policies that can improve post-secondary education outcomes for all foster children.
APPENDIX A. IRB APPROVAL

ACTION ON PROTOCOL CONTINUATION REQUEST

TO: Roland Mitchell  
Human Science and Education

FROM: Dennis Landin  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

DATE: December 4, 2018

RE: IRB# 3997

TITLE: The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni Experiences with Four-Year Postsecondary Institutions: A Case for Capital and Field Advantage

New Protocol/Modification/Continuation: Continuation

Review type: Full ___ Expedited X ____ Review date: 12/4/2018

Risk Factor: Minimal X ____ Uncertain __________ Greater Than Minimal _______

Approved X ____ Disapproved ________

Approval Date: 12/4/2018 Approval Expiration Date: 12/3/2019

Re-review frequency: (annual unless otherwise stated)

Number of subjects approved: 500

LSU Proposal Number (if applicable):

By: Dennis Landin, Chairman ____________________

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING – Continuing approval is CONDITIONAL on:

1. Adherence to the approved protocol, familiarity with, and adherence to the ethical standards of the Belmont Report, and LSU's Assurance of Compliance with DHHS regulations for the protection of human subjects*
2. Prior approval of a change in protocol, including revision of the consent documents or an increase in the number of subjects over that approved.
3. Obtaining renewed approval (or submittal of a termination report), prior to the approval expiration date, upon request by the IRB office (irrespective of when the project actually begins); notification of project termination.
4. Retention of documentation of informed consent and study records for at least 3 years after the study ends.
5. Continuing attention to the physical and psychological well-being and informed consent of the individual participants, including notification of new information that might affect consent.
6. A prompt report to the IRB of any adverse event affecting a participant potentially arising from the study.
8. SPECIAL NOTE: Make sure to use bcc when emailing more than one recipient.

*All investigators and support staff have access to copies of the Belmont Report, LSU's Assurance with DHHS, DHHS (45 CFR 46) and FDA regulations governing use of human subjects, and other relevant documents in print in this office or on our World Wide Web site at http://www.lsu.edu/irb
## APPENDIX B. POST-SECONDARY SUPPORT PROGRAMS

Table 11. Post-Secondary Support Programs Tailored to Meet the Needs of Former Foster Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Services and Supports</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. California</td>
<td>The Guardian Scholars Programs</td>
<td>Full tuition, priority registration, individual counseling/life coaching, year-round housing, referral to support services on the campus and in the community, monthly life skills workshops, community-building social events and student groups, student lounge, student drop-in center and computer lab.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Michigan</td>
<td>Seita Scholars</td>
<td>Six years tuition scholarship, 24 hours campus support and coaching in the following domains: academic and education; finances and employment; housing; physical and mental health; social relationship and community connections, personal and cultural identity; life skills (Unrau, Font, &amp; Rawls, 2011).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. New York</td>
<td>Nick’s Scholar Program</td>
<td>Five years personalized wrap around services, academic advisement, tutoring peer to peer mentoring, career exploration, networking opportunities, care packages ($500 – $700 per month for living expenses, $1000 – $1,200 per year for textbooks, up to $1000 per year for tuition, and $500 move – in allowance), coaches, and financial aid, care packages, work-study, academic support and career mentoring.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Washington</td>
<td>Passport to College Promise</td>
<td>Five years tuition and living expenses provide youth with assistance with preparing for college, priority consideration for work study, and specialized support services from college staff.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This is not an exhaustive list of comprehensive programs; but rather an illustration of what currently exists. 
*Sources:* (Cohn & Kelly, 2015; Emerson & Bassett, 2010; Foster Care to Success, 2013)
APPENDIX C. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (BROAD)

Pseudonym: _________________________

Interview One:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Start Time:
End Time

Introduction: I want to thank you for interest in participating in this research study and agreeing to partake in this two-part interview. The purpose of this interview is for you to share with me your personal experiences as a student pursuing a four-year college degree. I will obtain information from you about your experience growing up in foster care as well as obtain information from you regarding your K-12 school experience. I will also obtain information from you about your transition from high school to college as well as your college experiences. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential. Therefore, you are free to speak openly and honestly about your experience. Will it be okay for me to record the interviews? Before we begin, would you like to ask me any questions about this study?

Central Qualitative Question:

RQ1. What can we learn from Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction as it relates to how former foster care students, first-generation students, and continuing-generation students perceive their four-year post-secondary experiences?

Sub-questions:

RQ2. To what extent, if any, do Louisiana’s foster care alumni report lower levels of social, cultural and financial capital than first-generation and continuing-generation students? What factors explain variations in the types and levels of different forms of capital for each category of college students in this study?

RQ3. Is there a gap between the types and levels of various forms of capital that the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services report foster care alumni receive and what they get? If so, what are the gaps reported?

RQ4. To what extent do colleges and universities offer programs and services aimed at supporting the unique needs of foster care alumni?

RQ5. What are the theoretical, methodological and policy implication of the research findings?

Demographic Questions

1. Age:
2. Ethnicity:
3. Gender: ☐ Male ☐ Female ☐ Transgender
4. Number of years in foster care:  
5. Type of Foster Care: ☐ State ☐ Private  
6. Number of foster care placements:  
7. Major:  
8. Number of years in college:  
9. Currently enrolled? ☐ Yes ☐ No

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Tell me about where you grew up?  
  Probe: Can you describe your experiences while in foster care?  
  Probe: What type of relationship did you have with your caseworker?  
  Probe: What type of relationship did you have with your foster parents?  
  Probe: What do you remember about the occupations of your foster parents?  
  Probe: Describe your relationship with your biological parents? | RQ1 Supportive Networks | Habitus |
| 2. Can you describe your K-12 experiences  
  Probe: What were some of the most challenging issues as a foster child attending K-12?  
  Probe: How many K-12 schools did you attend? Can you tell me about your school placements?  
  Probe: How were you study habits?  
  Probe: What were your grades like in school (K-12)?  
  Probe: Did you excel or struggle with any particular subject?  
  Probe: What type of support did you receive from k-12? Tutoring? Special Education? IEP?  
  Probe: Did you participate in any extracurricular Activities? | RQ1 RQ2 Supportive Networks | Habitus Social Capital |
| 3. Can you tell me about your experience, if any, with mentors or role models?  
  Probe: What types of things did you do when you and your mentors were together?  
  Probe: What types of places did you and your mentors visit? | RQ1 RQ2 Supportive Networks | Habitus Culture Capital Social Capital |
| 4. How did you decide to pursue a college degree?  
  Probe: What experiences motivated you to pursue a college degree?  
  Probe: What do you feel was lacking in your | RQ1 Childhood circumstances | Habitus |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>childhood in regards to preparing you for college or what could have better prepared you for college?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Tell me about your experience with an Independent Living program?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Did you have discussions about college?</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Was going to college in your transition plan?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Can you describe for me your transition to college?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Tell me about your experience applying to college.</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td>Navigation of Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: What type of support did you receive when applying to college?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Who do/did you receive information from on various college issues such as what classes to take, financial aid, housing, etc.?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Have you ever experience a time when you Felt that you did not belong in college?</td>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>Cultural Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Have you met other students who Grew up in foster care on campus?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Habitus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you meet them?</td>
<td>RQ3</td>
<td>(A Feel For the game)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: What does it feel like to be around other students with different backgrounds?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: How comfortable are/were you in navigating through the college system?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: How do you compare yourself with the other students on campus?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Are you/were you involved in any college organizations?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What do you know about the Federal Chafee Educational Education &amp; Training Voucher?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: What are the positive aspects of the voucher?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: What are the negative aspects of the voucher?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Explain How you support yourself financially through college?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Financial Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Do/Did you have a job?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probe: Do/Did you get financial aid?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Who do/did you talk to when you experience stress or anxiety at college?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Constructs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. <strong>Tell me about weekends and holidays while you were/are enrolled in college?</strong>&lt;br&gt;Probe: Did you live in the dormitory? Did you stay on campus?</td>
<td>RQ2</td>
<td>Social Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. <strong>Can you describe for me your journey as a student pursuing a college degree?</strong>&lt;br&gt;Probe: What do you perceive were/are challenges and how did you manage the challenge?&lt;br&gt;Probe: What do you perceive were/are successes and how did you achieve that success?</td>
<td>RQ4</td>
<td>Habitus Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. <strong>Reflecting on your college experience, what was do you remember was most helpful for you in regard to getting through college?</strong>&lt;br&gt;Probe: What was most difficult for you?</td>
<td>RQ4</td>
<td>Cultural, Social and Financial Capital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. <strong>What three words would describe your post-secondary experiences?</strong></td>
<td>RQ1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This is the end of this interview. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything that you would like to add that I you feel I should include in this part of the interview? Is it okay to contact you to review the final transcript of the interview? Thank you so much for your time and participation. I appreciate and value your time and participation.

**Note:** Probing questions will also be used throughout the interview(s) to gain a more comprehensive description of the participant’s experiences. If needed, some of the questions will be modified for clarity.
APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL (SIMPLIFIED)

Table 12. Interview Protocol

Research Question: How do the caseworkers from the Louisiana Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) describe their efforts to influence the skills needed for a foster child to successfully transition from foster care to adult independent living?

Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer:
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:
(Briefly describe the project)

Questions:
1. What do you do for DCFS and how long have you been in this position?
2. Why did you enter the field of social welfare?
3. From a case worker’s perspective what skills do foster care-youth need in order to successfully transition from foster care to independent living?
4. How do you ensure the youth on your caseload are receiving independent living skills?
5. What do you know about the Federal Chafee Educational Education & Training Voucher? What are the positive and negative aspects of the voucher?
6. In your opinion how do independent living programs for foster children motivate youth to aspire a college degree.

Note: Probing questions will also be used throughout the interview(s) to gain a more comprehensive description of the participant’s experiences. Based on the participant’s range of experience, some the interview questions were modified.
2/19/2018

Dear Student:

My name is June Durio and I am a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at Louisiana State University. I am in the process of conducting research for my dissertation this spring 2018. I am interested in studying the four-year post-secondary education experiences of foster care alumni in Louisiana. My hope is that the study results will be used to help leaders in higher education, child welfare professionals and legislators as they work to improve post-secondary educational experiences for foster youth.

I have asked the Financial Aid Office to send you this brief survey/questionnaire to complete on my behalf. The survey should take you no more than ten minutes to complete. Your participation in this research is voluntary. All measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process and all documentation will be kept in a safe and secure location. No names or identifying information will be shared in this study. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board at Louisiana State University.

Thank you in advance for completing the survey,

June Durio

Doctoral candidate, Louisiana State University

Jdurio2@lsu.edu

225-588-1269 Cell
APPENDIX F. LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY INFORMED CONSENT

Study Title: The Perceptions of Foster Care Alumni Experiences with Four-year Post-secondary Institutions: A Case for Capital and Field Advantage

Name of Researchers:
June Durio (Ph.D. candidate)
Dr. Roland Mitchell (Supervising Faculty/Dissertation Committee Chair)

Please review this consent form carefully before you decide to participate in this research study.

The purpose of the research study: The purpose of this research study is to explore the perspectives and experiences of former Louisiana foster care youth’s enrollment at a four-year post-secondary institution.

What we will ask you to do: If you agree to participate in this research study, I will conduct an interview that will consist of a series of open-ended questions about your experiences while in foster care and about your experiences at a four-year post-secondary institution. The interview will take approximately 30-45 minutes to complete. With your permission, I will also tape-record the interview.

Risks and Benefits:
There are no perceived or anticipated risks to you for participating in this research study.

Incentive or Compensation:
You will receive a twenty-dollar gift card from either Wal-Mart or Target at the end of the interview.

You will not be negatively affected in any way if you decide not to participate in this research study.

Confidentiality:
The records for this study will be kept private. If I make this research public, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. I will keep my research records in a locked file; I will be the only person who has access to the research records. I will also destroy the tape from my recorded interview after I transcribed it, which I anticipate will be within two months of taping.

There is one exception to confidentiality that you need to be aware of. In certain research studies, it is not only required by law but it is also an ethical responsibility for the researcher to report situations of child abuse, child neglect, or any life-threatening situation to the
appropriate authorities. However, this research study is not seeking information related to these issues nor will you be asked questions about these issues as well.

Voluntary participation:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Should you elect to discontinue participation, any information already collected will be discarded. There is no penalty or loss of benefit for choosing not to participate.

Right to withdraw from the study:

You have the right to withdraw from this study at any time without consequence or penalty.

If you have questions: I am June Durio, the researcher conducting this study. If you have any question prior to or after signing this consent form, you may contact me on my cell phone at 225-588-1269 or email me at jdurio2@lsu.edu. You may also contact Dr. Roland Mitchell at rwmitch@lsu.edu or 225-578-2156.

Statement of Consent: The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about participants' rights or other concerns, I can contact Dennis Landin, Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-2918, irb@lsu.edu, www.lsu.edu/irb.

I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the investigator's obligation to provide me with a signed copy of this consent form.

I consent to take part in this research study.

Your Name: (Print) ______________________________________________

Your Signature ________________________________________________

(Date) __________________
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https://doi.org/10.1080/1361332052000341006
VITA

June M. Durio is a native of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She received a Bachelor of Science in Marketing and a Master of Education degree in Mental Health Counseling from Southern University and A&M College. Ms. Durio is a Licensed Professional Counselor and has worked in child welfare in various capacities for over twenty years. Ms. Durio has a deep interest in social justice and education issues. Working with the foster care population influenced her to pursue a doctorate in Higher Education Administration from Louisiana State University. Ms. Durio plans to continue advocating for disadvantaged populations through research and education.