

FOSTER PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: EXPERIENCES WITH
SCHOOL INVOLVEMENT

by

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Foster Parents of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement

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Abstract

For all children, and especially those with special education needs, parent school involvement is important to their experiences in school. School involvement is an umbrella term that encompasses various activities, including parent-teacher conferencing, attending open house events at school, reading to children, helping with homework, checking homework, and conveying expectations about academic achievement. Another form of school involvement is advocacy, or the actions taken by parents to ensure their children are receiving the most appropriate services at school. This form of involvement is especially important for children with special needs; parent duties described in IDEA (Leiter & Kraus, 2004) and the BC Ministry of Education Policy Manual echo this notion. While biological parents of children with special needs often face barriers to advocacy, foster parents in British Columbia (BC) may face these barriers in addition to ones imposed by the rules of the Ministry of Child and Family Development. For example, foster parents are typically not permitted to make decisions related to the education of the children in their care. In order to better understand the school experiences of children in foster care, it is important to understand the involvement and advocacy experiences of caregivers. Using IPA methodology, the experiences of school involvement and advocacy from the perspective of caregivers who foster children with special educational needs was explored. Participants in this study reported engaging in numerous school involvement activities, both at school and at home. In general, they reported feeling supported by schools, but they identified barriers to school involvement that are unique to the foster parent role. Further research on this topic is needed to understand how educators might better collaborate with foster parents.

Lay Summary

School involvement is a term used to describe all the actions parents take to support their child's education, like attending open houses at school, reading to children, helping with homework, and having high expectations. School involvement is important for all students, but especially for those with special needs. One type of school involvement that might be more important for children with special needs is advocacy, or actions taken by parents to get the best services for their kids. Foster parents in BC might face challenges to school involvement because of the rules of foster parenting. This study looked at foster parents of children with special needs, and their experiences with school involvement. Participants in this study reported doing many different things to be involved in school, and they pointed out some challenges that are unique to the foster parent role.

Preface

The present study was conducted by the graduate student, Rochelle Picardo, under the supervision of Dr. Laurie Ford. Ms. Picardo was responsible for the data collection, and she was primarily responsible for the analysis and writing components. The research conducted in the present study was approved by the University of British Columbia Behavioural Research and Ethics Board (BREB) under certificate H17-02523.

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Chapter 1

As of the most recent census, there were 43,880 children and youth in foster care in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2016). While Canadian statistics regarding the special educational needs of this population are unavailable, other research suggests a high prevalence of special education needs among children and youth in care due to exposure to multiple biological and psychosocial risk factors for developmental delays and psychopathology (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010). Children and youth in care also experience poorer educational outcomes than the general population (Scherr, 2007). The implication of such research is that children and youth in care are a unique population who may need support and services in school at a higher rate than the general student population.

For all children, and perhaps especially those receiving special educational services, school involvement is important to their schooling experiences (Duchnowski et al., 2012; Fan & Chen, 2001). Advocacy is a type of school involvement that is especially important to children with special needs to ensure the receipt of the best possible services (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). Although the term “advocacy” is seldom used in special needs legislation such as IDEA (Trainor, 2010) and the British Columbia Special Education Services: Manual of Policies, Procedures, and Guidelines (2016), the role of the parent as specified by these documents describes similar actions to those described in definitions of advocacy. For example, in the British Columbia Special Education Services Manual, school districts are advised to involve parents in the planning of educational programs of children with special needs (BC Ministry of Education, p. 10). Through such involvement, parents may offer input about whether the services provided are appropriate for their child, and they have opportunity to ask for the services they perceive would be most helpful for their child.

While biological parents of children with special needs often face barriers to advocacy (e.g., Dornbusch & Glasgow, 1996, Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006; Garcia, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000), foster parents in British Columbia (BC) may face these barriers in addition to ones imposed by the rules of the Ministry of Child and Family Development. For example, while foster parents can attend parent-teacher conferences and other school events if specified in their plan of care, they are not permitted to make special educational decisions for the child in their care. Rather, in BC, these decisions are made by a social worker, ideally after consulting the child in care, their foster parents, and their biological parents.

Critical to an understanding of the school experiences of children in care with special educational needs, is an understanding of how their caregivers engage in involvement and specifically advocacy in the school setting. A goal of this study was to understand experiences of school involvement and advocacy from the perspective of caregivers who foster children with special educational needs.

Definition of Key Terms

Advocacy. Duquette et al. (2012) used the term advocacy to “describe the actions of parents of students with exceptionalities as they attempt to obtain the educational services and programmes they feel are required by their son or daughter in order to have a successful school experience” (p. 1204). The term “advocacy” takes a similar meaning in the context of this study. It is the term used to describe the actions of foster parents of students with special needs as they strive to procure the educational services they feel will provide their foster children the best possible school experiences.

Special education needs (special needs henceforth). In this study, the BC Ministry of Education’s definition of special education needs is adopted. In BC, special educational needs

are defined as “those characteristics which make it necessary to provide a student undertaking an educational program with resources different from those which are needed by most students. Special educational needs are identified during assessment of a student; they are the basis for determining an appropriate educational program (including necessary resources) for that student.” (BC Ministry of Education, 2016, p. VI) Categories included in BC special education are: Intellectual Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, Behavioural Needs or Mental Illness; Physically Dependent, Deaf/Blind, Physical Disabilities or Chronic Health Impairments, Visual Impairments, Deaf or Hard of Hearing, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and Gifted.

Children and youth in care. In this study, the term children and youth in care (CYIC) is used to describe any child in government care, per the definition used by the Office of the Representative of Children and Youth (Richard, 2017).

Foster caregiver/parent. A foster caregiver or foster parent is someone who “provides substitute parenting for children who cannot safely stay with their own families, whose families have asked for help with parenting during times of crisis, or whose families need specific or periodic help in caring for their children.” (BC Ministry of Children and Family Development [BCMCFD], 2001, p. 3). Foster caregivers provide the children in their care with shelter, clothing, food, guidance and supervision, and emotional care, including love and inclusion in a family. While some studies include family members or extended family/ family friends in their definition of foster caregivers, the BC Ministry of Child and Family Development refers to these types of placements as “kinship” or “out-of-care” placements (Government of British Columbia, 2017). In accordance with this definition, in this study the term “foster caregiver” or “foster parent” is used to describe those with no previous relationship to the child in their care. All

caregivers who are given permission to foster have been thoroughly screened by the government (BCMCFD, 2001, p. 4).

Rationale for the Proposed Study

A disproportionate number of children in foster care have special needs and experience poorer educational outcomes than children in the general population. Given that parental advocacy is important for improving the educational experiences of children with special needs, understanding how foster parents of children with special needs experience school involvement and advocate for their foster children in school is crucial for understanding the schooling experiences of children with special needs in the foster care system. Presently, there is limited research on how foster parents perceive their experiences with school involvement and advocacy. The primary goal of this study was to understand experiences of school involvement and advocacy from the perspective of caregivers who foster children with special educational needs in British Columbia.

Summary

There are large numbers of children in foster care who are students with special needs, many of whom may experience poorer educational outcomes. Some foster parents are not allowed to attend educational planning meetings for the children in their care. Advocacy describes the actions taken by foster parents to procure the best possible services for the children and youth in their care (CYIC) with special needs. In this chapter, the key terms used in guiding the present study are highlighted along with a rationale for the study.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Overview

The proposed study will be informed by the literature on school involvement by parents, parent advocacy for children with special needs, and the academic and social challenges faced by children and youth in care. These bodies of literature will be explored in the following chapter. The goal of this chapter is to provide context and support for the purpose of the proposed study.

Parents Involvement in Schools

It is important for all parents to be involved in the education of their children, as implicated by legislation encouraging school involvement, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA] (2004) and the BC Special Education Services Policy Manual (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, Section B.4). Within the field of education, the term “school involvement” is used to refer to parental support of a child’s education; this support occurs both at home and at school (Lai & Vadeboncoeur, 2012). School involvement in education is perceived to be so important that there is a robust body of literature on this topic (see Fan & Chen, 2001 for a review). However, “school involvement” is an umbrella term that encompasses many different activities, making strict operationalization of this construct difficult. In a meta-synthesis by Wilder (2013), the results of 9 different meta-analyses about the effects of school involvement on academic achievement were amalgamated. This meta-synthesis found that the definitions of school involvement in studies of this construct included many actions taken by parents to be involved of the education of their children: parent-child communication about school; home supervision; checking homework; homework assistance; education expectations and aspirations; attendance and participation in school activities; reading with children; communication with school; parenting style; and parental attitudes towards education.

The results of this meta-synthesis indicated that school involvement has a positive impact on academic achievement, regardless of how school involvement or academic achievement are defined. Education policy makers have demonstrated awareness of the importance of school involvement in education for academic achievement, as evidenced by a history of school reform policies aimed at increasing school involvement (Domina, 2005).

Indeed, school involvement has the potential to benefit parents, students, and teachers. Parents can use involvement opportunities to help with empowerment to influence their child's education (Griffith, 1996). While some studies have shown mixed results concerning the impact of school involvement on achievement, an extensive body of literature has shown a positive effect of school involvement on student achievement. For example, in their review of the literature on school involvement, Pomerantz and Moorman (2007) concluded that across the studies they reviewed, school involvement benefitted children's achievement. They also concluded that these benefits were not better explained by parents' socioeconomic status or educational attainment. Furthermore, in the United States, where a gap in educational attainment persists between racial/ethnic groups, school involvement is associated with better educational attainment in African American and Hispanic/ Latino adolescents (Day & Dotterer, 2018). This suggests that for students at risk for poor educational outcomes, school involvement can be an important factor in their success. Because parents observe their children in broader contexts than do teachers, they have unique expertise about their children's needs, strengths, and challenges. Teachers can use the expertise that parents offer to facilitate better educational programming (Swick & Hooks, 2005).

As highlighted earlier, "school involvement" is an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of activities. These activities may include parent-teacher conferencing, attending open

house events at school, reading to children, helping with homework, checking homework (Duchnowski et al., 2012), and even conveying expectations about academic achievement to their children and establishing education-related rules at home (e.g., no screen time until homework is completed, etc.) (Fan & Chen, 2001). These different actions have been shown to have differing amounts of influence on student achievement. For example, in a meta-analysis of 25 studies that explored the relationship between academic achievement and different parent-involvement actions, Fan and Chen (2001) found that parental supervision at home had the weakest relationship with students' academic achievement, while parents' aspirations and expectations for children had the strongest relationship with academic achievement. Since there are many definitions and actions of school involvement, the proposed study did not employ any one definition in particular, to allow participant flexibility in deciding what this term means to them.

Parent Advocacy for Children with Special Needs

Defining advocacy. Raising a child with special needs can be challenging for parents (Resch et al., 2010). One challenge for these parents is procuring services at school that they perceive to be appropriate for their child (Siddiqua & Janus, 2017). One type of involvement that parents of children with special needs may participate in more often than other parents is advocacy. Trainor (2010) argues that, although the term "advocate" is absent in the language of the US Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), advocacy is a specific type of parent participation, and that much of IDEA's discussions of the role of parents in education describe advocacy, which is a specific construct, rather than school involvement, a more general construct.

In the education setting, advocacy is common. Historically, family members and education professionals have used advocacy to secure the most appropriate and inclusive education opportunities for children with special needs (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2001). Some conceptualizations of advocacy hold dissatisfaction at its core. Munro (1991) describes advocacy by families of children with special needs as a process through which the families can express dissatisfaction with the status quo of their child's education, and find empowerment and support. In other words, when a child with special needs is not automatically provided with the services they need to maximize their educational experiences, families can channel their dissatisfaction with the status quo into action through advocacy. These definitions of advocacy portray a specific type of involvement that contrasts with other, more passive, less visible forms of school involvement.

Parent engagement in advocacy. Parents of children with special needs often advocate for their children in the education setting. In the US, the wording of IDEA (2004) closely aligns with the principles of advocacy and suggests that parents should act as the main advocates for their children. For example, parents, or any member of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) team can request a psychoeducational evaluation in order to determine eligibility for special education services (Trainor, 2010). Parents have been called the "natural advocates" for their children because of their commitment to and investment in their child's wellbeing (McCammon, Spencer, & Friesen, 2001). Besides benefitting their children through better service provision, parental advocacy may create a sense of empowerment in parents (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006).

Another reason why parents must advocate for their children concerns the ability of school staff to act as advocates. Ideally, teachers and other school staff would advocate for

students with special needs. In a seminal book about normalization, or the principle of helping people with disabilities achieve a lifestyle resembling that of the general public, Wolfensberger (1972) proposed a rule that advocates must always operate independently of an organization. During this same period, Biklen (1976) echoed this concern in a paper describing advocacy as a specific type of helping relationship, stating that conflicts of interest occur when education professionals are expected to be advocates as well as service providers. This is because education professionals must act in the best interest of the organization they represent, and the needs of an individual may clash with the interests of the organization (e.g., to be cost effective, to provide education to many students, etc.) (Trainor, 2010).

Types of advocacy. Like school involvement, advocacy by parents takes different forms. Parents can engage in case advocacy, in which they are advocating for services in their child's specific case, or cause advocacy, in which parents advocate for a cause. Case advocacy involves making phone calls, attending office meetings, and writing letters that represent a child's best interest (Balcazar, Keys, Bertram, & Rizzo, 1996; Turnbull, & Summers, 2004; Wang, Mannan, & Poston, 2004). It also involves presenting reasons for educational accommodations and monitoring a child's progress (McCammon, Spencer, & Friesen, 2001). Cause advocacy involves shifting focus from an individual to a group (Mlawer, 1993). For example, a parent who has a child with autism may advocate for the initiation of a social skills group for all children with autism in the school. Cause advocacy also involves actions such as awareness campaigns.

Barriers to advocacy. While advocacy can be rewarding for parents and yield benefit for children, many parents face barriers to successful advocacy. First, there are informational and linguistic barriers to advocacy. To advocate effectively, parents must be able to access information about advocacy (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). They must understand the information they

access. However, the readability of many of the existing parent's rights handbooks exceeds the reading levels of many parents (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006). Moreover, parents who do not speak English as a primary language may not have access to information in their first language.

Second, cultural barriers sometimes prevent parents from advocating for their children. For example, deference to educators as experts may affect the approach that parents who are of Asian or Latino descent take to IEP meetings and other interactions with education professionals (Garcia, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000). Believing that education professionals have the expertise and motivation to provide their children with the best possible educational experiences, some parents may not ask for services beyond what their child is already receiving. Other parents may have cultural backgrounds in which questioning the decision-making of professionals is not acceptable. Parents from diverse backgrounds may require support to re-conceptualize the role of the school to align with a North American perspective before they feel comfortable voicing their opinions (Burke & Goldman, 2018). Some parents may belong to groups that have been historically marginalized, and avoid advocacy for fear of prejudicial treatment, and for distrust of formal education and service delivery systems (Burke & Goldman, 2018).

Lastly, the relationship a parent has with their child's school can be a barrier to advocacy. In a qualitative study, parent perceptions of their roles as advocates was examined with 33 participants from 27 different families living in the midwestern United States. Parents expressed concerns about the level of social networking required to advocate for their children, including the amount of time required to build relationships with teachers and administrators (Trainor, 2010). Parents and teachers with a positive relationship are also more likely to communicate with each other. Minke, Sheridan, Moorman Kim, Ryoo, and Koziol (2014) used the Parent-Teacher Relationship Scale (Vickers & Minke, 1995) to examine the relationship congruence perceptions

(shared perceptions of a relationship as positive or negative) of parent-teacher dyads. Participants were recruited from 21 midwestern elementary schools, and the resulting sample consisted of 206 parents and 82 teachers. The authors of this study found that parents who reported a higher level of home-school conferencing were more likely to be in positive congruent relationships with teachers, rather than negative or incongruent relationships.

In summary, advocacy, or acting on behalf of another person to address their needs, is a powerful way for parents to secure the best possible education experiences for their children with special needs. Parents are expected to advocate for their children and they have been conceptualized as the best individuals to do so, since education professionals are often precluded from doing so by conflicts of interest. However, parents are sometimes prevented from advocating for their children by barriers such as poor access to information, cultural differences, and relationships with teachers.

Advocacy for Children and Youth in Care (CYIC)

Challenges faced by CYIC. In order to understand why advocacy in the educational setting is crucial for positive school experiences of CYIC, it is necessary to acknowledge and understand the challenges that many of them face. In a literature review, Oswald, Heil, and Goldbeck (2010) identified high rates of developmental delays and psychopathology among populations of CYIC. In a study of 798 infants and toddlers who were admitted to a sole emergency shelter/receiving facility screened using the Denver Developmental Screening Test II, 62% of the children received a “suspect” score, meaning possible delays. 73% of these children received further evaluation using the Bayley Scales of Infant Development II (BSID-II) and 33-36% were classified with a mild delay and 26-30% with a significant delay (Leslie et al., 2002).

In schools, CYIC are disproportionately represented in special education, are retained at higher rates, and are more likely to be excluded than their peers (Scherr, 2007).

One hypothesis for the disproportionately high rates of developmental, mental health, and educational problems among CYIC is that often, the developmental histories of CYIC contain multiple psychosocial and biological risk factors. CYIC are more likely than children raised by their biological parents to have been exposed prenatally to nicotine, alcohol, or psychotropic drugs. They are also more likely to be exposed to maltreatment and neglect. Moreover, the inability of biological parents to care for their children is correlated with mental health problems, including substance abuse problems; parents' substance abuse is one of the most frequent causes of placement in foster care in the US. (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010)

It is also possible that risk of poor educational outcomes experienced by CYIC is exacerbated by the unpredictability and inconsistency in living arrangements that is often their reality. In the US, an estimated 22-70% of CYIC experience a placement disruption each year (Blakey et al., 2012), and these placement disruptions can be detrimental to academic growth, even when they do not result in a change in schools (Clemens, Klopfenstein, Lalonde, & Tis, 2018). In a meta-analysis of 17 studies examining the pathways CYIC take from education to employment, Cassarino-Perez, Crous, Goemans, Montserrat, and Castella Sarriera (2018) found that placement stability is associated with a greater likelihood of obtaining a high school diploma.

CYIC are often exposed to numerous risk factors that impact their development. Many school-aged CYIC have special education needs as a result of developmental delays or mental health problems (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010). The lack of stability that is often a feature of being in care can be a risk factor in and of itself, with placement instability linked to poorer

educational outcomes (Cassarino et al., 2018; Clemens et al., 2018). Advocacy is an important action for securing services for children with special needs (Trainor, 2010), with parents typically serving as advocates for these children (McCammon, Spencer, & Friesen, 2001). As CYIC do not typically have biological parents to care for or advocate for them, and they also do not have adoptive parents, it is important to consider who is making the decisions related to the procurement of special education resources and services for these children.

Advocacy for CYIC in schools. If parents are the best advocates for children with special needs, who advocates for children in foster care? This question is especially important because of the high proportion of children in care who have special needs (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010; Scherr, 2007). Biological parents of CYIC are unable to act as advocates because they are, temporarily or permanently, unable to care for their children. Having competent adults to advocate and make decisions for them is so critical to the education experiences of children with special needs that, in the USA, IDEA entitles every child in care to a “surrogate education parent”. These parents are sometimes foster parents, but they are also sometimes third parties who have no additional caregiving responsibilities besides decision-making in the education context. The availability and competence of surrogate education parents varies from state to state (Choe, 2012).

CYIC in Canada are not entitled by law to a surrogate education parent. In Canada, the foster care system varies by province, and each system’s policy on education decision-making is different. In BC, decisions about a child’s education are typically made by their social worker, although foster parents can attend parent-teacher events if specified in their foster child’s plan of care (M. Relevante, personal communication, July 25, 2017). While a social worker usually serves as the education decision-maker for a child in care, it is less clear who performs the

actions related to school involvement and advocacy that would inform these decisions in the Canadian context.

Foster Family Experiences

The foster family context. In Canada, and in BC, there is a dearth of data about foster families. CYIC were included in census statistics for the first time in 2011, and were included again in the 2016 census. This most recent census revealed 43,880 CYIC across Canada, with 6,200 in British Columbia (Statistics Canada, 2016). While data about the families caring for CYIC is not available for the 2016 census, according to the 2011 census CYIC were most likely to live in households with married couples. Of census family households (married couples, common-law couples, or lone-parent families) with at least one foster child aged 14 or under, 73.4% also contained biological or adopted children (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Examining the standards for households of foster families might provide some insight into the physical environment and socioeconomic status of foster families. The standards for environment of care, outlined in section E of the British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development (BCMCFD) Standards for Foster Homes Manual (BCMCFD, 1998), indicate strict requirements for the bedrooms of CYIC. Each child in care must have their own bedroom with a door and at least one exterior window with curtains or blinds installed to ensure privacy. Rooms commonly used for other purposes, such as offices, may not be used as bedrooms for CYIC. Each bedroom must have adequate storage for the personal belongings of CYIC. Homes must also provide adequate bathroom facilities (per community norms), and a family or living room with space large enough to accommodate all members of the family. Arguably, especially in regions with competitive housing markets and consequently expensive housing prices, such

stringent standards for the care environment make caring for CYIC possible only for families of relatively high socioeconomic status.

Placement in foster care can be a positive experience for many children. While there are few studies investigating the quality of the relationship between CYIC and foster parents from the perspective of CYIC, a study of foster parent motivations paints a picture of foster parents as warm caregivers. In a survey of 652 foster parents in Southwestern Ontario, individuals were most frequently motivated to care for CYIC by an altruistic desire to be loving parents and to save children from harm (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied 2006). Moreover, compared to children raised in institutions, children in foster care were more likely to achieve a secure attachment with their caregivers (Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, Nelson, & Guthrie, 2010). Additionally, the results of a study using regression analyses to examine statewide education and foster care placement data in Colorado indicate that children in family-like care arrangements demonstrate better educational growth than those in institutional settings (Clemens et al., 2018). Foster parents have the potential to significantly influence the lives of the children in their care. In a study of 52 CYIC and their biological foster parents, Marcus (1991) examined attachment quality in foster care relationships from the perspective of CYIC, foster care workers, and foster parents using the Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), the Parent/Child Reunion Inventory (Marcus, 1988), and interviews. The results of this study revealed that when children reported feeling more secure with their foster parents, they experienced more positive emotional ties and received more physical affection from them, experienced fewer achievement problems in school, and had better psychological adjustment. The attachment between CYIC and foster parents improved over time, with time in care associated with a stronger relationship between foster mothers and the children in their care (Marcus, 1991). Furthermore, improving

the attachment between foster parents and CYIC has been conceptualized as a therapeutic tool for remediating the aforementioned difficulties faced by CYIC (Gardenhire, Schleiden, & Brown, 2019).

Challenges to school involvement and advocacy for foster parents. Regarding the education-related decisions pertaining to CYIC in BC, ideally, the decision maker (the social worker) communicates with the caregiver (the foster parent) and the biological parent(s), if they have the ability to remain involved in conversations about their child. However, such communication may not always occur. Brown and Calder (1991) used a concept mapping design to qualitatively explore the factors that make foster parents stop fostering children. 49 foster parents from 30 families participated in this study. Statements about problematic relationships with child welfare agencies was a common theme; specifically, relationships with social workers were cited as problematic. Foster parents in the study had concerns about social workers not being concerned or knowledgeable enough about the children in their care (Brown & Calder, 1999). In a recent survey of 1095 foster parents, the majority of participants indicated that they desire an improvement in communication with social workers (Piel, Geiger, Julien-chinn, & Francie, 2017); many participants acknowledged the contribution of an overworked child welfare system to this lack of communication.

The Foster Family Handbook, which serves as a manual for foster parents in BC, states that foster parents are the individuals who are most involved in the daily lives of children in care (BCMCFD, 2001, p. 3). Although social workers and educational professional also play an important role, foster parents see the children in their care across broader contexts. However, although foster parents are sometimes permitted to attend parent-teacher meetings, they do not have the authority to make any educational decisions. Further, their involvement in their foster

child's education may be compromised by difficult relationships with social workers. Another challenge may arise from other's perceptions of foster parents. Brown and Calder (1999) also indicated the perception among foster parents that others viewed them as unimportant.

Specifically, they reported perceiving that others viewed them as "glorified babysitters" (p. 488). Teachers who hold such views of foster parents may be more reluctant to discuss the schooling of a child in care with their foster parents, and foster parents who perceive being viewed as unimportant may also be reluctant to engage with teachers. On a more encouraging note, in a qualitative study exploring foster parent perceptions of home-school communication, most of the seven participants who took an active role in the education of their child with special needs noted positive school relationships (Mires, Lee, & McNaughton, 2018). More research on the perceptions of foster parents is needed to unpack how they perceive their school involvement and advocacy experiences within the context of the BC education system.

Summary

There is a large body of literature about parent school involvement, and there is also literature about potential barriers to school involvement. One form of school involvement is advocacy, and this form of involvement is particularly important for children with special needs. There are disproportionate rates of developmental, mental, and health problems among CYIC. In BC, foster parents do not typically make decisions regarding the education of the child in their care, but they may be involved in other ways. There is currently limited research about foster parent experiences of involvement in the education of their child with a special need. It is unclear what actions foster parents take to become involved, and how they perceive this involvement. This study represents a foray into the exploration of how foster parents in British Columbia

perceive their involvement in the education of the children in their care. In the following chapter, the methodology used to explore these perceptions is detailed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter an overview of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the selected methodology for this study is reviewed. Study design, including participant criteria, recruitment, and characteristics are outlined. The measures used for data collection, as well as the procedures used for data analysis and the approaches to ensure rigour are described.

Purpose of the Study

Given the high proportion of children with special needs in the foster care system, and given that parental advocacy is important for improving the educational experiences of children in foster care, understanding how foster parents of children with special needs advocate for them in school is crucial for understanding the schooling experiences of children with special needs in the foster care system. The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of foster parents who have been involved in caring for a child with special needs pertaining to becoming involved with the child's school and engaging in advocacy for the child.

Research Questions

In this study, the following research questions were examined:

How do BC foster parents of children with special needs:

- 1) perceive their experiences with school involvement?
- 2) perceive their experiences with advocacy in the educational context?

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Due to the focus on foster caregiver perceptions, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) will serve as this study's methodological approach (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Among its many applications, IPA has been previously used to explore family engagement in special education (Eatough & Smith, 2008), fitting with the purpose and research questions in this

study. IPA is idiographic in nature, in that it is concerned with understanding meaning in the individual life rather than establishing causal laws (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are phenomenology and hermeneutics (Eatough & Smith, 2008).

Phenomenology is a philosophical stance positing that the reality of individuals is experiential, is constructed through engagements with objects and others in the world, and is meaningful. In addition to being a philosophical approach, phenomenology also describes a range of research methods (Eatough & Smith, 2008). *Hermeneutics* is an approach to the interpretation of lived experiences. In IPA, the participant and researcher seek to concurrently make sense of participant experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Therefore, an IPA approach acknowledges the researcher's important role in making sense of participant perceptions of their experiences.

The theoretical and methodological underpinnings of IPA make it ideal for use with foster parents of children with special needs. First, it acknowledges the uniqueness of individual experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008), which is important for the present study because each foster parent-child relationship is unique, and further, each family's experience with the diagnosis and treatment involved in a child's special needs is unique (Kubicek, Riley, Coleman, Miller, & Linder, 2013). Second, IPA focuses on individual perceptions about reality, an important feature given that the purpose of this study is to uncover foster parent experiences of involvement with schools of their foster children with special needs.

Ethical Considerations

Before commencing research with participants, including pilot participants, the study received approval from the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) at the University of British Columbia. Consent was obtained prior to the initial interview with participants. Before obtaining consent from participants, they were informed of the study's purpose and research

questions, and that they could choose to not respond to any questions that made them uncomfortable (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005).

There was a recognition by the researcher that discussing their experiences fostering a child with special needs could have elicited unpleasant feelings in participants, as many foster parents face challenges uniquely related to their fostering duties, such as feeling their competence undermined by the government and facing disruptions to their typical family life (Swartz, 2004). The possibility of participation in this study eliciting unpleasant emotions was discussed with participants as part of the consent process; however, no participants reported feeling discomfort or other unpleasant emotions after their interviews.

Maintaining the confidentiality of participants in this study was a high priority for the researcher. Confidentiality was maintained by concealing participants' identities and protecting the data collected. Pseudonyms for the participants and the children the participants discussed. All data collected or stored as electronic files, such as audio files, transcripts, and notes from interviews were password protected, encrypted, and backed up on an external hard drive and kept in a secure location during the study. All physical files, such as handwritten notes from interviews and the researcher's reflexive journal, were securely stored during the data collection and analysis. Upon completion of this study, these paper files along with the electronic file on a password protected and encrypted USB will be stored in a locked drawer in the research lab of the supervisor upon completion of the study. These procedures to ensure the confidentiality of participants were explained to participants during the consent process.

Recruitment and Participants

Recruitment. Recruitment was conducted with the support of two local foster parent organizations. The BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations (BCFFPA) and Strive Living

Society agreed to support this study by releasing information pertaining to this study to members of their associations. A recruitment flyer was also placed in the BCFFPA newsletter. Caregivers interested in the study were asked to contact the researcher for more information about the study.

In addition, snowball sampling was also used. At the end of their interviews, each participant was asked if they knew any other foster parents who might have an interest in participating in the study, but no participants were obtained in this way. Word of mouth recruitment was also used, with the researcher asking friends, family members, and other education professionals if they knew foster parents who met the recruitment criteria.

Despite these efforts for nearly nine months, and the initial strong support of the two organizations, it was difficult to gain parents with the time and or interest in taking part in the study. There were a number of barriers and challenges to recruitment in this study. Due to confidentiality concerns, the researcher was not permitted to reach out to foster parents directly. They were required to contact the researcher first based on a letter shared by agency staff or others. Despite a number of reminder emails to the study contact at the BCFFPA, no members of this group expressed interest in this study. Two foster parents from Strive Living contacted the researcher, but one cancelled due to a last minute commitment related to her caregiving and a new time for the interview was not scheduled. Foster parents have many daily responsibilities relating to the care of their children. Those interviewed in this study described constantly working without taking breaks from the children in their care. This is also supported in the research literature on families of students with special needs and those with children in foster care. The researcher speculates that participation in this study was difficult for foster parents due to constraints on their availability and while they may have had interest, time to take part was difficult.

The original goal for participants was 5-10. However, given the challenges in recruiting for over 12 months including frequent consultation with the supervisory committee, a decision was made to stop recruitment efforts in July and complete the thesis phase of the study with the four parents who had agreed by this deadline.

Participants. There were four participants in the present study. All participants are foster parents who are caring, or who have cared, for a school-aged child who either has a special needs designation, or is undergoing a psychoeducational assessment (required to receive a special needs designation). Per the British Columbia Ministry of Child and Family Development (2001, p.3), a foster parent is someone who “provides substitute parenting for children who cannot safely stay with their own families, whose families have asked for help with parenting during times of crisis, or whose families need specific or periodic help in caring for their children.” While some studies include family members or extended family/family friends in their definition of foster parents, the BCMCFD refers to these types of placements as “kinship” or “out-of-care” placements. In accordance with this definition, in this study the term “foster parent” was used to describe those with no previous relationship to the child in their care. In this study foster parents who had children in their care for under six months were not recruited, since these foster parents may not have had enough opportunities to become involved with the school of the child in their care. Because the aim of this study was to explore the experiences in school involvement and advocacy of foster parents of children with special needs, it was important that participants in this study had enough time to a) learn about the special need of the child in their care, b) develop a relationship with the child in their care, and c) have contact with the school of the child in their care. Consistent with most IPA studies, a small number of participants comprised the sample of this study. Since IPA methodology requires examining participants’ lived experiences, and how

they make sense of those experiences, a small number allows for in-depth analysis while still getting diverse perspectives (Smith, 2004).

The sample of this study is comprised of four foster parents, all of whom are fostering or fostered the children in their care as single parents. All participants in this study identify as female. All names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

Julie. As a first time foster parent, Julie was a foster parent to five siblings for three years prior to adopting the children, plus another one of their siblings. Two of the school-aged children currently have special education designations: Aiden who is designated as a student with Autism (Category G), and Adam who is designated as a gifted student (Category P). Adam also has diagnoses of Attention Deficit/ Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD) and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum (FAS). Julie has a Bachelor's degree. While she was in university, she worked in a group home for adults with Autism.

Mary. Mary was a foster parent for a total of ten years. While she was a foster parent, she completed a teacher training program and worked as a teacher in the public school system. She is currently still working as a high school teacher. She cared for three different children over this span of time, all of whom were in her home independent of one another. Two of the children, Brad (in her care for six years) and Lisa (in her care for three years) had special education designations for Learning Disabilities (Category Q).

Rebecca. Although Rebecca is currently fostering three children, she chose to focus our interview on one child who is no longer in her care, but with whom she maintains frequent contact. Mason did not have a designation during his time in Rebecca's care, but he had an IEP with goals primarily for behaviour problems and was in the process of getting a psychoeducational assessment through a provincial pediatric clinic. He was in her care for eight

months. Prior to foster parenting, Rebecca worked as a bookkeeper, but she left this job due to the demands of foster parenting.

Nancy. After many years working in business, Nancy became a full-time foster parent to three children sixteen months prior to her interview. One of the children in her care, Brian, meets criteria for both a Chronic Health (Category D) designation and a mild intellectual disability (Category K) designation. Nancy also has some experience working with adults with special needs.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Name ¹	Ethnic Identity	Gender Identity	Previous special needs experience?	Total number of children fostered
Julie	Caucasian	F	Y	6
Mary	Caucasian	F	Y	3
Rebecca	Hispanic/ Latino	F	N	5
Nancy	Caucasian	F	Y	3

¹All names are pseudonyms

Procedures

Interview protocol development and pilot. A four-phase interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework (Castillo-Montoya, 2016) was employed to maximize the potential for high quality interviews with participants. This framework was suitable for developing semi-structured interviews, the key measure for this study. The four phases of an IPR include 1) aligning interview questions with research questions by using strategies such as forming a matrix to map interview questions onto research questions; 2) building a conversation that elicits specific information related to the purpose of study by using strategies such as writing a script for the

interview; 3) receiving feedback on the interview protocol by sharing it with a trusted colleague, or, in the researcher's case, a supervisor; 4) piloting the interview protocol. Because of difficulty with recruitment and a desire to not lose potential participants for the study to the pilot, the interview was piloted on a peer of the researcher to ensure that questions made sense, and to provide the researcher with a sense of how long each interview would take.

Measures.

Background information questionnaire. Prior to their semi-structured interviews, foster parents were asked background information questions to provide a general picture of their home life. These questions included: information about the participants (parent gender, marital status, educational level, annual income, the of children in their home); information about the foster-care arrangement (how long the child has been in the foster parent's care, if/ how often they visit with the biological parents, if/ how many siblings of the child the parent is caring for); and information about the child and their designated special need (age, grade, and sex of the child; which BC Ministry of Education designation the child received, when they received the designation). A copy of the Background Information Questionnaire is located in Appendix A.

Semi-structured interview. Although there is no requirement to use semi-structured interviews in IPA methodology, it is the most commonly employed method of data collection in IPA studies because the interaction between researcher and participant allows for flexibility in the co-exploration of the participant's lived experience (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Unlike structured interviews, which are standardized, inflexible, and predetermined (Fontana & Frey, 2000), and unstructured interviews, which begin with no more than one predetermined, open-ended question (Eatough & Smith, 2008), semi-structured interviews use predetermined questions as a guide. This approach allowed participants to change the flow of the interview and

open up channels of inquiry not previously considered by the researcher. Consistent with IPA methodology, the semi-structured interview format considers participants to be the experts on the phenomena under investigation (Smith & Osborn, 2003). A copy of the semi-structured interview used is provided in Appendix B.

Eatough and Smith (2008) state that conducting a high-quality semi-structured interview is a balancing act between following the interview schedule and probing spontaneously, a task that can be difficult for novice researchers. Although a script was developed beforehand, the researcher probed spontaneously, asked relevant follow-up questions whenever necessary, and omitted some questions depending on their relevance to the participant.

Participants were given a choice of interview locations to maximize the possibility that interviews were conducted in a location convenient and comfortable for them. Most participants chose to be interviewed in their homes so that they would not have to arrange for childcare. With their consent, interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for in-depth data analysis (Baker-Williams, 2006).

Reflexive journal. To assist the researcher in positioning herself within the research, understanding potential biases, and make decisions regarding the research process, the researcher kept a reflexive journal (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009) throughout the course of the present study. Entries were made to the journal after every interview in order to keep track of the general content of and the researcher's reactions to each interview, and after any other times the researcher engaged with the study in a significant way, for example, during the transcription of interviews and the subsequent analyses.

Data Analysis

Overview. Because IPA involves the researcher making sense of the participant making sense of their experience, it can be described as a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2004). Smith (2004) describes three characteristic features of IPA that influence the ways in which IPA data is analyzed. First, IPA is idiographic, in that analysis begins with an in-depth examination of the first case before the second case is examined. Second, it is inductive, meaning that it does not seek to support predetermined hypotheses. Therefore, analysis is flexible, and unexpected themes may emerge during the process of analysis. Finally, IPA is interrogative, meaning that the results of data analysis do not stand alone, but are discussed in relation to the extant literature. IPA methodology is attractive to students and novice qualitative researchers because there are practical guidelines available for conducting data collection and analysis (Smith, 2004). In the present study, data analysis was conducted using the following procedure, described by Storey (2011).

Step 1: initial reading of the transcript. The first step in IPA analysis involved reading the transcript of the interview with the first participant multiple times in order to get a general sense of what the participant was trying to communicate. This process of conducting a general read of the interview was helpful in facilitating reflections regarding the frameworks the researcher is applying to their interpretation of the data. This initial read of the transcript was followed by re-reading the transcript and writing notes in response to the text. These notes were written in the left-hand margins of the transcript.

Step 2: identifying and labelling themes. The second step in IPA analysis involved continuing the initial interpretation of the interview by identifying and labelling themes. Using

the notes previously made in the left-hand margins of the transcript, themes were identified and labelled in the right-hand margins.

Step 3: linking themes and identifying thematic clusters. The third step in IPA analysis involved searching for relationships between themes. Themes may cluster together to form superordinate themes. In order to organize and search for connections between them, themes were written by hand on a separate piece of paper. Then, using word processing software, a table was created to organize the themes into superordinate and subordinate theme clusters. Themes were then cross-referenced with the transcript in order to verify that the theme fit with what was said in the interview to ensure that the participant's words supported the researcher's interpretation of the data. The table of themes included columns to identify key words of themes, and the page and line numbers of the supporting statements. This helped the researcher keep track of where each theme occurred in the transcript.

Step 4: repeating analysis with all participants. The idiographic nature of IPA requires in-depth analysis of the first participant's interview before moving on to the next case. Once the procedure above was completed for the first participant, it was repeated until all participant interviews were analysed individually. New themes that emerged in each interview were checked against themes that emerged in already analyzed interviews. A final group-level table of superordinate and subordinate themes was created.

Because the researcher does not share the experience of parenting a foster child with special needs with the participants, it was impossible to fully comprehend the experiences of participants (Fontes, 1998). Awareness of this fact was important to assigning themes to data in a manner that was as sensitive and unbiased as possible (Berger, 2013). To facilitate reflections regarding the researcher's position in the process of data analysis, the researcher kept a reflexive

journal of notes about thoughts and reactions to the transcripts themselves, as well as reflections about the effectiveness of techniques used in data analysis and ideas for improvement of the analysis.

Ensuring Rigour

Overview. Although there are many different criteria to assess rigour in qualitative research, the four criteria proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) are the most common (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Strategies were employed to ensure that these four criteria are addressed in the present study. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for a rigorous qualitative study are: **credibility**, or the value and believability of the findings; **dependability**, similar to the quantitative concept of reliability, refers to how stable the data are in a qualitative study; **confirmability**, or the neutrality and accuracy of the data; and **transferability**, or whether or not findings can be transferred to another, similar context.

Credibility. In the present study, credibility was demonstrated by employing triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

Triangulation. Comparing data from multiple sources to ensure the data representing each participant's experience is complete and credibly presented is called *triangulation* (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). In the present study, conclusions were made by synthesizing information from interview transcripts, researcher notes about interviews, and the researcher's reflexive journal.

Peer debriefing. Asking other researchers to review the processes used and conclusions made by the researcher, *or peer debriefing*, was employed to ensure that the conclusions reached by the researcher were logical in the eyes of another researcher who has used IPA, and the

researcher's supervisor. Since the interactions between the researcher and the participant is central to IPA research, it is expected that no two researchers will independently arrive at the same conclusions regarding the data (Andrews, Lyne, & Riley, 1996). Therefore, the goal of peer debriefing in this study was to see if the researcher's peers and supervisor agreed with the theme labels, and support the processes taken to arrive at those labels (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

Member checking. Participants in this study were asked to review the transcript of the initial interview. This process, referred to as *member checking*, was employed before data analysis. Allowing to participants to read the transcripts of their interviews before they were analyzed helped ensure that the interviews were accurately recorded (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). This approach gave participants the opportunity to respond to their own words (Melia, 1982). No participants requested that changes be made to their interview transcripts.

Dependability and confirmability. Dependability and confirmability are closely related, and so are the processes for establishing these criteria in a study (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). Reflexivity and an audit trail were used to establish dependability and confirmability in the present study.

Reflexivity refers to a continuous process of self-reflection by researchers to facilitate awareness about their actions, feelings and perceptions (Anderson 2008; Hughes, 2014). The literature on reflexivity suggests that reflexivity significantly adds to the rigour of qualitative research by guiding the research process and limiting the bias and subjectivity of researchers (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009; Lambert, Jomeen, & McSherry, 2010; McCabe & Holmes, 2009;). Reflexivity also helps the researcher to consider their position in relation to the research (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009). In the present study, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal (Jootun, McGhee, & Marland, 2009) during all forthcoming stages of this research, from

writing the BREB application to writing the results of the data analysis. This reflexive journal was used to provide information about participant contexts. It was also used to record the researcher's perceptions of participant experiences, and it was reviewed during analysis of transcripts to facilitate the recognition of the researcher's position in the research.

Audit trail. An *audit trail* (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013) is a record of the decisions made throughout the research process. This record provided the rationale for the methodological and interpretive judgements made by the researcher. An audit trail was maintained by taking detailed notes related to the background of the data and rationale behind all decisions made in the study. Using a medium separate from the reflexive journal, but perhaps with some overlapping content, the researcher took notes detailing when, why and how decisions were made in the present study. Additionally, the final written description of the present study includes copies of all final measures used, such as the background questionnaire and a copy of the interview protocol.

Transferability. In a study that has established transferability, the reader is able to make decisions about whether the findings can be applied to another context. The reader can only make such decisions if they are provided with ample information about the original context of the research (Koch, 2006). The present study uses *thick description* to assist the reader in making informed decisions about the transferability of findings to their specific contexts (McKee, 2004). Detailed descriptions of participant accounts, information about the societal context, and examples of raw data (quotes) were used for thick description in this study.

Summary

In summary, in this chapter a description of IPA methodology and a rationale for why this is an appropriate methodology for addressing the research questions of this study is provided. Details about the recruitment and selection criteria of participants and the procedures for data collection and analysis were described. Additionally, in this chapter considerations about maintaining scientific rigour and the ethics of the present research is presented and discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings

Chapter Overview

The purpose of this research was to explore how foster parents of children with special needs perceive their experiences with school involvement and advocacy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four foster parents and the data from these interviews was analyzed using IPA. The findings from these analyses are presented in this chapter.

Context

All participants in this study reside in the Metro Vancouver area of BC. According to the most recent census, it is the most densely populated area of BC. Compared to rural areas of British Columbia, community resources and amenities, such as recreation centers, are more easily accessed. Metro Vancouver is a culturally and linguistically diverse city, with 48.9 % of the population being members of non-European ethnic groups and 2.9 % of the population speaking English plus another, unofficial language. (Statistics Canada, 2016)

Regarding the cultural context of the foster family, it is of note that 52.2 % of all CYIC are Indigenous, despite accounting for only 7.7% of the total child population (Statistics Canada, 2016). As a result, there is often a cultural mismatch between CYIC and their caregivers. Schools in BC have been attempting to integrate Indigenous content into the curriculum; however, given that change in education can occur slowly, it is unclear how much culturally relevant content is being conveyed to Indigenous CYIC through their schools. The cultural mismatch between CYIC and their caregivers, and possibly their schools, is an important contextual consideration to make when attempting to understand the experiences of CYIC and their caregivers in BC.

Participants in this study all fostered their children as single parents. Although they reported occasional support from friends and family members, they were singlehandedly

responsible for the day to day care of their children. Three out of four interviews took place in the homes of participants. The only participant who requested a meeting in another location was Mary, who no longer had any children in her custody at the time of the interview. The other participants requested meetings in their homes so that they wouldn't have to arrange for childcare, a task that is difficult for foster parents due to strict requirements about who is able to babysit their children.

Visiting the homes of the three participants provided insight into their day to day lives. All three in-home interviews were interrupted near the end by children who needed something, or who simply wanted their caregivers' attention. One participant was ill during her interview. All three participants lived in two-story homes that were not crowded but were not overly spacious; toys and children's books were abundant in every home. In field notes, the researcher noted that being a foster parent appeared to be a job in which one is on call 24/7. The researcher also noted that all four participants appeared to enjoy talking about their experiences as foster parents. They all seemed, according to the researcher's field notes, to be passionate about helping their children succeed.

Overview of Themes

The results of the analysis are organized into five broad themes and 14 subthemes summarized in Table 1. Although participants identified a range of positive and negative experiences related to involvement in the education of their foster children with special needs, all participants generally viewed schools as supportive.

Throughout this chapter, participant quotes are included to support description of participant contexts for the reader. The provided quotes will also help the reader understand the themes, and will ensure that the themes identified by the researcher are grounded in the

participant interviews; such grounding helps with confirmability, and will ensure that the findings presented in this section are as close as possible to the participants' own meaning making. Only select quotes are provided in this chapter, but additional relevant quotes are provided in Appendix H. Details about the organization of themes, subthemes, and quotes are presented in Table 2.

Themes are presented in this chapter in terms of their relevance to the research questions of this study. The topics that participants chose to discuss in their interviews largely addressed research question 1: How do foster parents perceive their experiences with school involvement? That participants generally viewed schools as supportive was a surprising finding of this study. This study defines advocacy as "the actions of foster parents of students with special needs as they strive to procure the educational services they feel will provide their foster children the best possible school experiences." Since participants were generally satisfied with the services their children received in school, they did not frequently discuss content related to research question 2: How do parents perceive their experiences with advocacy in the educational context? Because advocacy itself is an action of school involvement, the discussion of the results of research question 2 will occur within the discussion of the results of research question 1.

The broad themes related to research questions are presented in order of relevance to the research question. The first theme discussed is Foster Parent Involvement, as this theme directly captures foster parent experiences with school involvement. Three subthemes were identified within this theme: involvement actions; teacher characteristics valued by foster parents; and advocacy. This final subtheme provides information addressing research question 2. The second broad theme discussed is Involvement Challenges related to the Foster Parent Role. This theme builds on the Foster Parent Involvement theme by identifying involvement challenges that are

unique to foster parents. Within this broad theme, four subthemes were identified: disagreement about child's needs; role confusion; logistical challenges; and stigma.

The next three broad themes are concerned with systemic factors that influenced participants' experiences of school involvement. Although these broad themes do not answer research question 1 as directly as the first two broad themes, they are important for the understanding of foster parent experiences with school involvement. The third broad theme discussed will be Training/ Resources. This broad theme provides a snapshot of how training and resources, whether personal or provided by an institution, influenced participants' care of their children, which includes school involvement. Two subthemes were identified within this broad theme: training/resources from the ministry; and personal characteristics/ resources. The fourth broad theme discussed is Support. This theme builds upon the Training/ Resources theme, but is more specifically related to participant perceptions of support from institutions, and how those perceptions may have influenced involvement. Within this broad theme, two subthemes were identified: support from the ministry; and support from schools. The final broad theme discussed is Sharing of Information. This theme encapsulates participant experiences of receiving information from institutions or sharing information with institutions; these exchanges of information may influence the involvement sought by foster parents. Three subthemes were identified within this broad theme: change can be sudden; information shared by schools; and information shared by ministry.

Table 2

Organization of Themes and Subthemes, and Number of Supporting Quotes

Broad Theme	Subtheme	# Supporting Quotes
Foster Parent Involvement		27
	Involvement Actions	15
	Teacher Characteristics Valued by Foster Parents	8
	Advocacy	4
Involvement Challenges Related to Foster Parent Role		25
	Disagreement about Child's Needs	9
	Role Confusion	5
	Logistical Challenges	6
	Stigma	5
Training/ Resources		27
	Training/Resources from Ministry	18
	Personal Characteristics/ Resources	9
Support		24
	Support from Ministry	11
	Support from Schools	13
Sharing of Information		18
	Information Shared by Schools	4
	Information Shared by Ministry	9
	Change can be Sudden	5

Because the care of all CYIC in British Columbia is overseen by the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), all participants made frequent references to this government

organization, referring to it as either “MCFD” or “The Ministry”; this wording will be retained in participant quotes and in discussions of themes. When the Ministry of Education is discussed, it will be referred to as such.

Although the custody status of the children discussed varied across participants, for the sake of brevity, all children will be referred to as the children of the participants who discuss them, rather than as “foster children” or, “children in their care.” Similarly, because there was variety in the fostering arrangements between each participant, participant names are included with quotes to allow the reader to ground the quotes within each unique participant context. Any edits made to quotes were minimal: for example, repeated words, filler words, and short responses (e.g., “okay”) were removed. These removals are indicated by ellipses (...).

Research Question 1: How do Foster Parents Perceive their Experiences with School Involvement?

Broad theme one: foster parent involvement. This broad theme represents participant descriptions of being involved in the education of the children in their care. Because school involvement includes different actions and is influenced by many different variables, three subthemes were identified within this broad theme: foster parent involvement actions; teacher characteristics; and advocacy. This last subtheme provides information relevant to research question 2.

Foster parent involvement actions. Participants in this study described a number of actions they took to be involved in the education of their children. Consistent with the literature on school involvement, some of these actions occurred at home, and some occurred at school. Mary described using her teaching expertise to support the development of Brad’s study habits at

home. "...I would've been involved at home just helping him study, because at that time I was becoming a teacher, I was doing my long term practicum when he was living with me. "

Nancy described implementing daily practice sessions for her children who struggled with reading and writing. "So I sit here, and they come here, and I put on the timer. And for five minutes, one person reads, one prints, and one does something else."

Participants also described seeking enrichment activities for their children outside of school.

In the summer I put him in day camps because he was also very hyperactive. [Rebecca]
 ...anything he's done outside the school whether it's taking swimming lessons, going to gymnastics, I have done. [Nancy]

Because they had children with challenging behaviours for school staff, Julie, Rebecca, and Nancy reported spending extensive time at school and communicating with teachers.

...and I was getting called to school meetings all the time or called to pick up Aiden early from school...[Julie]

...so that's how I was able to get closer with his teachers as well because I was at the school all the time. I was always there asking how he was doing, checking up on his homework, checking up on his behaviour...you know just everything he was doing, like how many times he'd be in the hallways...so I made my presence known...[Rebecca]

And all of a sudden, I have communication books, and I take these to school every day and, so every day I write something...[Nancy]

Julie and Nancy discussed their involvement in the Individual Education Plans (IEPs) of their children. They reported that it is important for children and their caregivers to be active participants in their IEP planning,

...and I talk to the boys about their IEP, I read them their IEP. [Nancy]

I have since been in IEP meetings—like I was in an IEP meeting there with a teacher who wasn't his fulltime teacher who had never been in an IEP meeting before. At the annex I had been in an IEP meeting with the vice principal who was also the resource teacher who had never done an IEP meeting before...(laughing) so now I've been in situations where it's kind of...oh I actually know more what's going on than you! [Julie]

Teacher characteristics. Participants identified teacher characteristics that facilitated communication and involvement. Julie and Rebecca cited an open and welcoming position from teachers as important for encouraging communication between home and school.

“Feel free to email me any time”...like a welcoming position. “Thank you so much for coming in.” Like oh okay, they really want me there. They want communication, they're happy to work with me, they're happy for this to be a partnership. [Julie]

...they actually were both very open and happy to have me come and check up on him.
[Rebecca]

As a foster parent, it was important to Julie that teachers recognize her perceptions of her children as valid, especially when their behaviours at home and school differed. Because Adam was a very bright student with a gifted designation, Julie perceived that the school had difficulty recognizing and addressing his symptoms of ADHD and FAS in the classroom. She recounted the importance of teachers recognizing her experiences and perceptions as valid.

It's awkward when they're like, oh we don't see-- and there are two ways to say we're not seeing that in the classroom. It can be like a. “Oh, that's really fascinating, I wonder why there's a difference between home and classroom, let's think through why things may be coming across differently in different environments, versus just like, “we don't see any of that here, guess it's okay, you must be crazy”

She also highlighted being concerned that her role as a foster parent diminished the importance of her perceptions in the eyes of educators.

I feel like it's whether they seem to believe me or not, I think like it's the same...like some of them I just feel like they think I'm this overprotective, I'm reading prenatal exposure into everything, I think everything's wrong with my kid because they came from someone else.

Others reported valuing teachers who outwardly care for their students.

They both cared about him quite a bit and they both wanted him to succeed. [Rebecca]
And I think they have to have a vested interest...what she'll say about Brian is she's rooting for him, that she is absolutely rooting for that kid, you know. [Nancy]

Advocacy. Because participants generally reported being satisfied with the services their children were receiving in schools, the topic of advocacy at school did not emerge in interviews as frequently as was initially expected. Julie and Rebecca both briefly shared instances of advocating for their children in schools, and all participants reported being comfortable with the idea of asking schools for changes in services if believed it was appropriate to do so. Julie's child Adam had been designated as a Gifted student, so she described needing to advocate in order for teachers to address the difficulties presented by his ADHD and FAS symptomatology.

I remember at one meeting...the teacher was like, half the kids in my class have IEPs, like Adam's fine. I was like, okay, but let's just for a minute pretend he was at a school 10 blocks down... and then the resource teacher was like, oh Adam's file would look totally different if we were at a different school! And I'm like...okay let's just stay on that page for a second here!

Rebecca described the difficulties of advocating for a child who did not have a Ministry of Education special needs designation: “I kept pushing for that, I kept asking his teachers, what can we do for him, and it always came down to, there’s no diagnosis...there’s no psych reports.”

Broad theme two: involvement challenges related to foster parent role. Parent or School involvement challenges specific to the foster parent role are discussed in this broad theme and four subthemes were identified: disagreement about child’s needs; role confusion; logistical challenges; and stigma.

Disagreement about child’s needs. Participants noted feeling awkward and uncomfortable discussing children’s needs with the biological parents of the child due to differing perceptions. Julie reflected on attending medical appointments with the biological mother of the children she was caring for. Eventually, she stopped inviting their biological mother to appointments because the information she had about her children’s behaviour was not perceived to be current or accurate.

I was supposed to be inviting birth mom to every single medical thing...and eventually I stopped, cause I was like, I can’t do these medical, because she’s giving one opinion and then I can’t tell about what I’m seeing in the home now, and she’s saying her kids are fine.

She expressed a similar sentiment regarding involving her children’s biological mother in IEP meetings, clarifying that she did not want to invalidate their mother’s perceptions, but still believed it was important to provide teachers with accurate information and to ask questions.

...but I remember being really awkward because then we were doing this like birth mom foster mom... and not really feeling free to ask or direct questions, or if the observations

in my home differed from that of birth mom, not wanting to override what she... her experiences or perceived experiences. So that was super tricky.

Julie implies that she struggled to convey the difficulties her children were having because their biological mother did not view these difficulties as problematic. Rebecca reported a nearly missed opportunity to have a psychological assessment at a specialized children's clinic because Mason's biological father did not see his behavior as problematic, and the appointments for the assessment were scheduled while he was in his father's custody.

And part of it too is that he's...very much in denial as to what's wrong with his children. He doesn't believe there's anything wrong with them, he's always saying, "they're so smart, they're so smart," and yes, they are smart but there are things about them that aren't...they're not doing well.

In addition to the biological father not seeing his child's behaviours as problematic, Rebecca cited challenges with taking the child to appointments and an acrimonious relationship with the MCFD as possible reasons why the biological father did not want a psychological assessment.

Mom and Dad didn't see any...of the psych, like...they just saw that he acted out a lot, and he misbehaved, and he was very destructive, and very violent...but neither one of them thought to seek help. Because both parents were addicts, they saw the ministry as bad.

Role confusion. Julie reflected on her role as a foster parent being difficult to define, particularly with regards to her role in the school.

Like I didn't know what my place was, especially that first year because there was so much focus on, these kids are going home, keep the mom in the loop. So it was like who...who am I? What's my role? What am I in this situation?

In filling out paperwork for the school, she reported trying to interpret the implications of how her relationship with her children was labelled.

By the letter of the law I'd be the guardian, but I check off mom because I go with what...I feel like what they're asking, I feel like it's more in line...I'm not the social worker, I'm not the guardian. For all intents and purposes I'm the mom so I check off mom.

She ultimately adopted the children she fostered, and expressed being more confident in handling matters related to their education after she had custody.

It was a great day, the day I walked in there with those custody papers. This is who... it's just defining, too, foster parent is such a weird box, it's like who am I, I'm just in between, its neither here nor there.

Rebecca shared not knowing what her boundaries were in terms of providing care for her children; for example, upon noticing problematic dental hygiene, she was unsure of whether to take the liberty of finding them a dentist "...and that's the thing though too, when I initially got them, I'm like, well am I supposed to take them to the dentist, to the doctor..."

Logistical challenges. Julie and Rebecca, who fostered multiple children at the same time as single parents, discussed being overwhelmed and overburdened with appointments. Julie described her busy appointment scheduling "...the kids came in 2014, but in 2015 I had 100 appointments, not including BI therapy stuff." She commented, "Everything was awful. You're trying to get out the door and be on time for the appointment." Although Rebecca expressed similar feelings of stress, she reported feeling, "on top of it. Appointments, the whole bit." She highlighted, however, that certain tasks that might be simple for biological parents have extra steps for foster parents.

I needed some information changed, and they wouldn't change it because my name wasn't on, I'm like what're you talking about? But it didn't make sense because the other secretary did it, but this one wouldn't do it, so I had to get the social worker to do it.

Stigma. Participants discussed occasionally feeling stigmatized, or wanting to avoid feelings of stigmatization. This subtheme came up frequently in Julie's interview, possibly because many of her children had diagnoses of FAS, a particularly stigmatized developmental disability. She cited avoidance of stigma as one reason to disclose her children's custody status to their school.

...and partly people are just like looking at you like, why do you have six kids? And why do you have three kids who were born early, like really, you had a 28 weeker who's brain damaged, and then you proceeded to get pregnant two more times and had another kid who was in NICU? ...which is like maybe not the right reason to disclose...or we start talking about FAS and I don't want people to think that like...I don't know, I don't want people to think that I drank with my kids!

Mary echoed this sentiment, but for her it was driven by her children's behaviours rather than their diagnoses, as she perceived that their behaviour was a representation of her skill as a foster parent.

...although I must admit, this is my ego—when something came up, she was sort of bullying some other kids and she stole a watch from me, the school heard her talking about it with one of her friends and so they told me...there was no reason to tell them she was a foster kid because she could've easily been mine, but when all that bad behaviour came up, I told them, because I didn't want it to reflect on me! And I was telling her...I said just like a regular parent, your behaviour reflects on me! And it does.

Because her children's biological parents were well known at the school, Julie expressed that stigma was dually directed towards her for being a foster parent, and towards the biological parents for having their children placed in care.

[I felt like]...an intruder. I felt like the bad person, as the foster parent. Even though I wasn't responsible for the removal, I wasn't the social worker. But I still felt like I was the...the takeover, or something?

Although it was difficult for Julie to be perceived as an intruder, she expressed that it was not preferable to be perceived as a hero, as this perception came at the expense of her children's biological mother.

...I don't want to be the hero, but I think people...there's also the perspective where people will just totally disregard, or like, oh the poor kids, or oh, their first mom must be a total loser or, how could she ever leave her kids. And I don't want that either, like we love her...I don't need that either.

Broad theme three: training/resources. This broad theme represents participants' descriptions of the training and resources involved in the care of CYIC with special needs. Within this broad theme, two subthemes were identified: lack of training/resources from ministry; and personal training/ resources. All participants expressed dissatisfaction with both the resources and the training provided by the MCFD. They also reported a dearth of assets provided by the MCFD, in terms of fiscal resources and preparedness. All participants also reported their own personal characteristics and resources to be valuable assets in the care of CYIC.

Lack of training/ resources from ministry. Participants reported that the MCFD was sparing with their monetary resources, only dispensing what foster parents advocated for. To accommodate the large number of children placed in her home, Julie had to move to a larger,

more expensive home, and the MCFD promised to support this move by paying half of her rent. However, they did not provide this increase in pay for five months, and they only did so when she asked. Reflecting on this experience, Julie expressed:

... but it was like all of a sudden just like that they gave like another two and a half thousand dollars a month, but we were five months in and I had to ask for it as a brand new foster parent.

Rebecca expressed frustration in her perception that the MCFD sees CYIC as nothing more than a budgetary consideration.

... every single thing that I find that has happened with these kids all comes down to money. Money. There's no extra money for this. There's no extra money for that. We need to get approval from Victoria for this. If you're gonna do that it has to be out of pocket...everything, has to do with money, and these kids, a lot of the time feel like to me just a number in a line with a dollar symbol on them.

As similar sentiment was expressed by Nancy. "All they see is two kids times...how many thousands of dollars they can save". Further, she also described her unwillingness to accept a lower fee because of the ramifications for her children.

It's the only job in the world if you do a good job, you get demoted. Basically it's like, you know I said, because they said, they wanna know if you're willing to take a lower fee. Why? Why should I? Because it also has an impact on them. Because if I make less money then they get less stuff too...so I said no. No.

Two participants reported concerns that asking for resources would result in the removal of children from their homes.

They were aware I had too much on my plate but instead of adding stuff in they were just saying they were gonna split them up. [Julie]

...and now I'm in a situation, and one of the reasons I moved to Vancouver is because they're talking about taking them away from me...to save money. ... it's so unfair because the amount of money, it's not even a drop in the bucket considering the whole bucket they have for this damn province. [Nancy]

Participants communicated that they initially were ill-prepared by the MCFD to handle the demands of navigating the necessary systems required to care for their children, such as the legal, school, and medical systems. They expressed dissatisfaction with the amount of training provided by the MCFD and the coverage of certain important topics, such as the court process.

And it was just super stressful...I really didn't understand how the court process worked...I'd gone to training, I feel like they should've covered this in training a lot more, they kind of overviewed it, but I didn't understand like...there's removal, and they need to go to court within the first- I can't even remember now... [Julie]

...except for maybe the um, foster parent training, it was 52 hours of um, workshops and things to do over the course of the year. A year? 2 years. And none of it was relevant to the school system. [Mary]

...part of the reason why the referrals were put in late is because I was a brand new foster parent. [Rebecca]

Personal resources/ characteristics. Participants discussed their personal resources (access to vehicles, family support, etc.) and characteristics (work experience, personality traits, organizational skills, etc.) as being helpful in the care of CYIC. Julie described these resources with a metaphor, “cards in my deck,” to describe the ways in which her life had equipped her to

handle the challenges of foster parenting children with special needs and to express empathy for the biological parent of the children in her care.

...how birth moms held on for as long as they did? Like I have way more cards in my deck. And I don't mean smarts in my head, I mean just like life cards that are dealt to me... I have parents who fly from Ontario to help me, I have no residential school in my past...

She also discussed using these "cards in her deck" to obtain resources for herself and her children. "Like I was given no support or resources, any that I had I did on my own".

In discussing her motivations for foster parenting, Nancy expressed a similar sentiment of gratitude about how she was raised, and a desire to help her children enjoy childhoods similar to hers. "Did I ever want for a meal? No. Did the power ever go out? No. Was I ever abused in any way shape or form? No. Did I ever feel unsafe? No."

Mary, who currently works as a teacher and has a background as a mental health worker, reported that the professional connections she formed in previous jobs were helpful while she was foster parenting.

I also knew her mental health worker, I used to work with her...so she would share with me stuff that, you know at work she would tell me little things she found out...without disclosing anything she would keep me in the loop with MCFD stuff.

When setting up her home to accommodate CYIC, Rebecca described the importance of personal funds, resourcefulness, and family support in making her spaces appropriate for children.

Free stuff, stuff from relatives, and that like you know that sort of thing and that's how I was able set myself up. And then I'm finding out from other foster parents, that's what they did too. That they...got a lot of... free stuff...and they had to you know, just kind of

had to revamp what they had, that sort of thing. Like... cribs, car seats, all of that, we pay for ourselves.

Broad theme four: support. This broad theme is closely related to the Training/ Resources theme, but while the Training/ Resources theme focused on participant perceptions of training and resources “Support” captures perceptions of participants’ overall feelings of support from institutions and professionals. Two subthemes within Support were identified: support from the Ministry/ social workers; and support from schools.

Support from the Ministry/ social workers. Most participants shared that social workers were largely absent from the lives of the children and foster parents on their caseloads, limiting communication to that which was initiated by foster parents. They expressed a mixture of understanding and frustration about an understaffed, overburdened MCFD.

I sent out, probably six seven emails, “Hi, still asking for this, still asking for this, still asking for this”...but I was asking for everything a million times and not getting it so you’re also...ya, I feel bad, they’re busy, they’re overworked, they have too much on their plate, I know that, so I’m also trying not to be too irritating but, also, like...what am I supposed to do? [Julie]

They weren’t very present. They certainly weren’t emotionally involved, which is fair enough. You can’t be. You can’t survive in the job, there’s such a high turnover as I’m sure you know. [Mary]

...she [social worker] said we don’t give you respite, we don’t give respite. That’s what the social worker that I had kept saying to me. And I kept telling her, I’m like I need a break. I need a day away. I need a break. Bordering tears. [Rebecca]

Support from schools. Conversely, all participants viewed school administrators and teachers as supportive of the children in their care. Similar to understanding the constraints on social workers resulting from an overburdened MCFD, they discussed understanding constraints imposed by the system within which educators must work. Three participants pointed to specific education professionals they viewed as especially important to the education of the children in her care.

Well he had no classroom teacher at the beginning, so they had like, a sub for a week, and then they had another sub, and then they had a fill-in and then they hired someone but she was on a mat leave until February...so then they had...but...this probably sucks but at least we had the same—knowing he had his EA the whole time. [Julie]

...it was a lot of talking to the secretaries. Secretary staff know everything. They know all the kids, they know who's in trouble, who's getting awards... they know everything.

[Rebecca]

Expressing appreciation for the expertise of teachers in working with children who have special needs, Nancy pointed to resource teachers as being valuable assets. “I’d say it’s [the school’s] really good...so they have like a resource teacher who sort of handles this...these kinds of kids...” She also cited quality staff as making up for other possible shortcomings of the school. “But what they lack in that, they make up for in a willingness to do whatever it takes, hire good quality people, and be adaptive...”

Two participants perceived that schools were doing the best job they possibly could under their circumstances. “So yeah I think they were as supported as they possibly could have been. I mean short of waving a magic wand, right?” [Mary] “I think they’re doing a really good job within the

confines of what, you know, but I mean let's face it, teaching, the curriculum hasn't changed..."

[Nancy]

All participants expressed appreciation for the care provided to their children by schools.

"...that school cared very deeply for those kids." [Julie] "...they could do no wrong as far as I was concerned, cause it was all about Brad and he was really happy there." [Mary] "In every school, I haven't had any issues." [Rebecca] "I hope whatever school they end up in next year here, is very similar, really symbiotic." [Nancy]

Broad theme five: sharing of information. This broad theme captures participant experiences related to the sharing of information between individuals and institutions. Identified within this broad theme are three subthemes: information shared by schools; information shared by the MCFD; and change can be sudden.

Information shared by schools. Regarding Adam, who had the Gifted, ADHD, and FAS diagnoses, Julie reflected on not knowing about his FAS diagnosis until the end of his first school year with her, as this information was not shared with her by the social worker or the school.

I literally didn't know that the 10-year-old had an FAS diagnosis until the end of the first year of school when all of a sudden, I realized...wait a sec, if he has an IEP, that means he has some sort of...like he would have to have a diagnosis, you don't just get an IEP for no reason... So then I asked the school about that report and the secretary was like, "I'm not really supposed to give this to you but here."

She further discussed how the report she was given by the school secretary recommended follow up testing that had not taken place, which limited the services and curricular adaptations that

could be offered. She also commented that learning about his FAS diagnosis helped explain many of the behaviours she had been struggling with at home.

Information shared by the MCFD. Julie highlighted that limited information regarding the health and development of her children was shared with her by the MCFD. She reflected on an early medical appointment for one of her children. “I go in and they’re like asking me background and I’m like, I have no idea, how about you tell me whatever you can. I know nothing.” She expressed that her limited knowledge about the medical and developmental backgrounds of her children was partially influenced by rules regarding releasing information to foster parents. Occasionally, information was shared with her by Ministry workers whom she perceived were willing to break the rules in the best interest of the children.

...absolutely I was given limited, when I was at an appointment, it would totally depend on who the person was and if they were a rule follower, or if they were more, “I know what the rule is, but...common sense prevails and this person who is actually caring for the child, needs to know.”

When further probed about the gaps in her knowledge of the children in her care, Julie expressed believing that information was not always intentionally kept from her but rather sometimes her children’s social workers did not have important information on file. “I don’t think the social workers were aware of a lot of it... some of their records they have, some they didn’t. I spent probably a year and a half asking the social worker for Adam’s full autism assessment...”

Mary reflected on MCFD not sharing her children’s custody status with the school and reported believing that it is relevant for schools to know when students are in care. “I do think the school should know. I think it should be a Q-code—not a learning designation but it should be on file, that...they’re a guardian of this province.” Rebecca echoed this concern when she

revealed that nobody from the MCFD informed the school when her child underwent a placement change. “When the kids, when Mason moved home, they [the school] didn’t know, the social workers didn’t tell them, I did. They didn’t know they had gone home.” Further, she expressed concern about the safety of these children due to this lack of information shared by the MCFD.

...the secretary called the social worker asking them if the kids had gone home because they were told they had gone home and you know, no one had contacted them and the social worker says, oh I’ve never had to contact any of the schools. What do you mean?
[Rebecca]

Change can be sudden. Participants reported having limited information about the duration of placements. They did not know how long each child placed in their care would stay in their care and they expressed fear that their children could be removed at any time, and without warning. Nancy said the possibility of her children being removed suddenly has “kept me up at night, I’ve thrown up.” Another reflected on how her children were initially placed in her home for one week, and how the uncertainty of their placement affected her.

...it’s also very weird to have kids in your home that you don’t know if they’re coming or going, you don’t know if they’re staying, you don’t know if they’re going home... and like, this elusive box of, “are you coming, are you going?” I mean it was a one week placement to begin with, extended by a month, then extended another three months...and then it was extended by six months at one point...and then after that, it was this constant, “oh, we’re sending them to the reserve, we need to split them up”, one point they were talking about returning some home...[Julie]

Rebecca expressed a similar sentiment, adding that MCFD sometimes cannot provide advanced warning because they themselves may not know about placement changes ahead of time “I could ask them ‘til they’re blue in the face when do you think this kid’s going home and they have no idea... and it’s really frustrating, cause a lot of the time the foster parent is the last one to know, but we’re the first ones that have to prepare the child.”

Summary

In this chapter a discussion of themes and subthemes identified from participant interviews is presented. Five broad themes and 14 subthemes were identified across the four participants. Participant quotes were provided to illustrate the information of themes and subthemes. Key findings included information about participant perceptions of training/resources provided by the MCFD, support from institutions, actions related to foster parent involvement, the sharing of information by institutions, and challenges related to foster parent involvement.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview

This chapter is organized into four main sections. In the first section, the key findings are summarized and discussed. The second section is a discussion of the study's strengths and limitations. In the third section, this study's findings are discussed with regard to their relevance for the practice of School Psychology. Finally, future directions for this research are discussed.

Discussion of Key Findings

In this study, an exploratory step towards understanding foster parent perceptions of school involvement is represented. This understanding is important, as rules imposed by the MCFD can restrict the school involvement actions of foster parents. A key finding of this study is that in general, foster parents felt supported by schools, but they did not feel supported by the MCFD. This was a surprising finding, as schools often do not have permission to provide information to foster parents. Moreover, the nature of being temporary caregivers in a child's life may make it difficult for schools to know what supports to offer to foster parents. However, participants reported their experiences with schools to be largely positive. They viewed educators as truly caring for students. Recognizing the constraints imposed on educators by systemic factors such as government funding, participants conveyed the opinion that most educators have students' best interests at heart, and that they do their best to teach within a system that does not always meet their needs as educators. In contrast, participants did not feel supported by the MCFD and its social workers. They reported social workers to be generally absent and difficult to communicate with, pointing out that an overburdened system could be to blame for this lack of involvement in the lives of the families on their caseloads.

This finding has implications for the education of CYIC with special needs. Foster parents do not have permission to make decisions about the education of the children in their care, yet social workers—the individuals who do have this permission—are largely absent from the lives of the children on their caseloads, and a lack of regular communication with these children’s caregivers might preclude social workers from developing an understanding of their special needs. Coupled with the frequent changes in custody experienced by some CYIC, the lack of accountability for the education of CYIC with special needs may result in them slipping through the cracks. This was the case with Julie’s child, Adam, whose follow-up psychoeducational assessment was years late because his school file was not accessible to his foster mother and the social worker was unaware of this need for follow-up; and it was nearly the case with Rebecca’s child, who nearly missed the opportunity for a specialized psychoeducational assessment due to back-and-forth custody changes between Rebecca and the child’s biological father. As a whole, CYIC are at risk for lower academic achievement due to their exposure to the risk factors that resulted in their placement in foster care (Oswald, Heil, & Goldbeck, 2010), and due to the placement disruptions that are a common experience for CYIC (Blakey et al., 2012). For CYIC to be at further risk due to a lack of accountability from the MCFD is unacceptable.

Participants in this study were involved in the education of their children. Consistent with the literature on school involvement, participants engaged in a variety of involvement actions, both inside schools and at home. Inside schools, participants reported engaging in activities that are supported as having a positive impact on academic achievement: talking to teachers in person; maintaining home-school communication books; attending parent-teacher conferences; attending IEP meetings; and forming relationships with teachers. At home, participants reported

helping their children with homework and conveying expectations about academic achievement. There were few mentions of engaging in advocacy activities in schools, as participants were generally satisfied with service provision by schools.

Participants identified characteristics of teachers that they viewed as facilitating home-school communication. First, they appreciated teachers who were welcoming of and open to communication with them. Second, they valued teachers who validated their perceptions of the children in their care. While the first finding may be generalized to parents in general, the second finding is specific to the foster parent experience of school involvement. Foster parents can sometimes feel like they are perceived as glorified babysitters (Brown & Calder, 1999), even though they often hold valuable expertise about the children in their care. Valuing this expertise can have a twofold impact on students: 1), if foster parents feel validated when sharing their perceptions of their children with educators, they may feel encouraged to continue communication with educators; 2) learning about a child's needs from their caregivers may promote a better understanding of those needs among educators.

Biological parents often face barriers to involvement, such as informational and linguistic barriers (Fitzgerald & Watkins, 2006), cultural barriers (Garcia, Perez, & Ortiz, 2000; Burke & Goldman, 2018), and home-school relationship barriers (Minke et. al, 2014). Participants identified barriers to involvement that are specific to foster parents. They reported that the foster parent role is not clearly defined. As a result, foster parents may not have a clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities with regards to the education of their children. For example, Julie reported not knowing how to list her relationship with her children when filling out school paperwork, for she felt more like a parent than a guardian.

Foster parents may also disagree with biological parents regarding the needs of the child in their care. Given that a goal of the foster care system is to eventually return children to their biological families, some foster parents care for children who maintain regular contact with their biological parents, and these biological parents continue to be involved in the decisions made about the child's education. In Rebecca's case, the biological father of Mason, the child in her care, had difficulty with recognizing his behaviour and academic problems at school. As a result, he did not want Mason to receive a psychoeducational assessment; however, without this assessment, the school-based resources available to Mason were limited. Consequently, the ways in which Rebecca could be involved in Mason's education, and the services she could request, were also limited.

Participants reported that occasionally, logistical challenges created by their status as foster rather than biological or adoptive parents presented barriers to school involvement. Although participants overall felt welcomed by schools, they communicated that sometimes legal red tape had the potential to make simple tasks difficult. For example, in one instance, even though she had done so before, a school refused to change information about the child in Rebecca's care because her name was not on the required documents.

Finally, participants communicated perceptions of feeling stigmatized by members of the school community. Such feelings of stigmatization may influence the nature of relationships with the school. Julie and Mary reported wanting others to know of their status as foster parents because they did not want their children's diagnoses and behaviours to reflect poorly on them. Sometimes, perceptions of stigmatization might deter foster parents from having a presence at school. This was the case for Julie, who reported feeling like an outsider because her children's biological parents were well-liked at their school.

Limitations and Strengths of the Present Study

Limitations. A smaller than anticipated sample size represents a major limitation of this study. In order to be consistent with guidelines for IPA research, this study aimed for 5-10 participants. However, due to difficulties with recruitment, the final sample consisted of four participants. Multiple recruitment leads were pursued and the effort to recruit participants was extensive over the course of one year. Despite these efforts, only five foster parents reached out to participate in this study, and from those five only four participated. It is possible that the population sought in this study—foster parents of children with special needs—have schedules that precluded them from any extra time commitments. Indeed, in this study, participants mentioned feeling extremely busy, overwhelmed, and unable to take breaks. It is also possible that asking participants to reach out to the researcher was too difficult for the busy population sought for this research.

Although the researcher originally sought a sample with similar contexts, the resulting sample of participants all had experiences that were different from one another; that is, they fostered for different amounts of time, had varying numbers of children in their homes at one time, and completed their interviews at differing stages of foster parenting, with one participant reflecting on her experiences years later. Consequently, it was not possible to generalize findings across participants. However, that each participant's context was so different illustrates the variety of arrangements that educators might encounter when working with foster families. The responses from the sample in this study highlights that when working with foster families, it is important to learn about foster families as unique units, rather than making assumptions based on previous experiences.

Foster parents are subject to standards and laws composed by government organizations like the MCFD, and, as discussed, these standards and laws may influence the ways in which foster parents are involved in the education of their children. These standards and laws vary from province to province in Canada. Because of this regional variation, this research cannot be generalized beyond the British Columbia foster parent context.

Strengths. An aim of the present study was to gain an understanding of foster parent perceptions of school involvement and advocacy. The methods of data collection and analysis were appropriate for the research questions of this study. As this study was highly exploratory, semi-structured interview was the chosen method of data collection. This method proved to be fruitful, as participants frequently chose to take their interviews in directions that had not been anticipated by the researcher. The resulting data was rich and informative about the experiences of participants.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was the methodology chosen for the analysis of participant interviews. This was an ideal methodology for the present study. As discussed, each participant in this study had unique experiences with foster parenting. IPA is idiographic in nature, meaning that establishing causal laws is not the goal of research employing this methodology; rather, IPA is concerned with understanding how individuals understand and make meaning from their experiences (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Moreover, the idiographic nature of IPA methodology means that it is flexible in its analysis. Researchers using IPA do not seek to support predetermined hypotheses. Given the dearth of literature on this topic and the exploratory nature of the present study, this flexibility was crucial in allowing for surprising findings to be reported and discussed.

Relevance for School Psychology Practice

While the findings from this study are not generalizable across contexts, the teacher qualities identified as valuable by participants can still inform ways in which school psychologists and other educators might try to be more inclusive of foster parents in schools. Participants in this study reported appreciating educators who viewed their perceptions of their children as valid. In the psychoeducational assessment of CYIC, school psychologists might consider taking care to ensure that they acknowledge the perceptions of foster parents as valid. The expertise that foster parents have about the children in their care should be regarded as an important consideration in diagnostic or consultative decision making processes.

CYIC are a special population that is overall at risk for poorer academic outcomes, and foster parents may engage with schools in different ways than biological parents. School psychologists might encourage or support teachers to find out the custody status of the students in their classroom so they know whether home-school communication entails communicating with a biological parent or a foster parent. This knowledge may help teachers to better understand home life of the children in their classroom, which will result in a better understanding of the children themselves.

School psychologists are often point people who connect families to resources. They may sometimes even be the people who are responsible for building supportive communities in their schools. Participants in this study reported having little training about the resources that might be available to them and their children. School psychologists who have interacted with foster parents can help them learn about resources. In schools with many foster parents, school psychologists might arrange for them to meet and form supportive connections with one another.

Future Directions

Research. As discussed, there is limited literature on the school involvement experiences of foster parents of children with special needs. Expanding on this exploratory study would serve to better prepare educators to collaborate with foster parents. Future studies might investigate educator perceptions of working with foster parents and CYIC in order to identify gaps in knowledge.

Advocacy. The present study, and future similar studies, may be used as a springboard for advocacy for foster families. Such research, which illustrates the experiences of foster parents, including the difficulties of the role, may help keep government organizations such as the MCFD accountable for supporting foster parents. Another possible application of such research might be the development of a program to educate foster parents about their role in the education of the children in their care, and inform them of important resources.

Conclusions

This study represents an exploratory step into understanding the school involvement experiences of foster parents caring for children with special needs. The present bodies of literature on both school involvement and foster families have little information about this topic. Five broad themes, with two to four subthemes each, were identified in this study. In general, participants felt supported by schools but not by the MCFD. They reported engaging in a variety of school involvement activities, and they identified barriers to involvement that are specific to the foster parent role. Educators can use this information to improve their collaborations with foster parents. Future directions for this research might include investigations of educator perceptions of working with foster parents and the development of training programs for foster parents.

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APPENDIX A: SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

**Foster Parents of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement
Screening Questions**

1. How long have you been caring for your foster child?
2. Does your foster child have a continuing custody order?
3. Are you planning to adopt your foster child?
4. What specifications does your plan of care have regarding your foster child's education?
5. Has your foster child been identified as having special needs? What BC Ministry of Education Designation did they receive?
6. How long has your foster child been attending their current school?
7. Have you had any contact with this school during this time?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**Foster Parents of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement
Interview Schedule**

1. Tell me about your relationship with your foster child.
 - a) What is the best thing about your foster child?
 - b) What is the most challenging part of fostering this child?
2. Tell me about your foster child's special need.
3. How would you describe your relationship with your foster child's social worker?
4. How would you describe your relationship with your foster child's school?
5. What involvement, if any, did you have in the writing of your foster child's Individualized Education Plan?
6. What are some other ways in which you collaborate with your foster child's school?
7. Tell me about the services your foster child receives at school.
8. Do you feel that the services your foster child receives at school fits with their needs?
9. What are your experiences meeting with school personnel?
10. In the time you having been fostering your foster child, how many teachers have they had?
 - a) What (if any) characteristics about the teachers you have met has impacted your experiences meeting with teachers?
11. What (if any) characteristics about your foster child have impacted your experiences meeting with teachers?

APPENDIX C: BACKGROUND INFORMATION FORM

Foster Parents of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement Background Information

How old is your foster child? _____ Years _____ Months

What is the gender of your foster child? _____ Male _____ Female _____ Other

Did your foster child have to change schools when they were placed in your home? ___ Y ___ N

Approximately when did your foster child receive their BC Ministry of Education designation?

What is your understanding of your foster child's special education needs?

How many foster homes has your foster child been in (including yours)? _____

How many social workers has your foster child had (including the current social worker)? _____

What is your foster child's first language? _____

What is your foster child's ethnicity? _____

What is the primary language spoken in your home? _____

What is your gender? _____ Male _____ Female _____ Other

What is your age? _____ Years

What is your first language? _____

What is your ethnicity? _____

How many people currently live in your home?

_____ Number of adults including you

____ Number of children and youth aged 19 or younger

____ Number of children and youth aged 19 or younger who are foster children

What is your current employment status? _____

Do you have prior experience with foster children? ____Y____N

If yes, please provide details:

APPENDIX D: RESOURCES FOR FOSTER PARENTS

Provincial Foster Parent Support Line

- Offers support for foster parents outside of regular ministry office hours, available Monday-Friday from 4:00 PM to 12:45 AM; weekends and statutory holidays 8:00 AM to 12:45 AM
- Support line number:
 - 1-888-495-4440

BC Federation of Foster Parent Associations

- Offers a support line for foster parents available Monday-Friday from 8:30 AM to 4:00 PM
- Support line number:
 - 1-800-663-9999

Parent Helpline

- Offers support to parents and caregiver who need help coping with family issues, have parenting-related questions, or just need to talk
- Support line number:
 - (778) 782-3548

Hollyburn Family Services

- Offices in Surrey and North Vancouver
- Provides therapeutic and support services aimed at strengthening youth and family functioning
- Offers foster family support and relief services
- Contact:
 - Visit <https://services.hollyburn.ca/contact.php> to send an online message
 - Phone:
 - North Vancouver office: (604) 987-8122
 - Surrey office: (604) 496-7997

Parent Support Services of BC

- Offer support groups and a support line for parents and people in parenting roles
- Contact:
 - Email:
 - office@parentsupport.bc.ca
 - Phone:
 - Province-wide toll-free: 1-877-345-9777
 - Burnaby office: (604) 669-1616

APPENDIX E: RECRUITMENT FLYER

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

children, families
and communities LAB

Are you a foster parent?

Does your foster child have an identified special need?



*If **YES**, we would love your help!*

We are interested in learning about the school involvement experiences of foster parents who are caring for a child with a special need.

To learn more about this study, please contact us at the email or phone number listed below:

Contact: Laurie Ford (Principal Investigator) OR Rochelle Picardo (Co-Investigator)
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx
Phone: (xxx)xxx-xxxx

APPENDIX F: RECRUITMENT LETTER

Foster Parent of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement

Letter for Initial Contact for Parents

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology & Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx

Student Co-Investigator: Rochelle Picardo
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology & Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx

Dear Foster Parent/Caregiver,

We are writing to invite you to be part of a research study about the school involvement experiences of foster parents caring for a child with special needs. Your participation is very important to help us better understand the school involvement experiences of foster parents and their relationship with their foster child's school. This letter is intended to introduce you to the study and to describe what it would mean to take part.

What is the purpose of the study?

Many children in foster care have special needs. Often, having a special need can mean that the school and the child's family has to communicate in order to make decisions about the child's education. Little is known about how foster parents perceive their relationships with the schools of their foster children with special needs, but understanding these experiences is important for foster parents and children alike; such information could help support foster parents talk to schools, and it may also help us better understand the schooling experiences of children with special needs in the foster care system.

What is involved if you take part in the study?

The research study involves taking part in a one-to-one interview with the researcher. The interview will take approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted at a time and place you and the researcher agree on. There may be a need for a brief follow-up interview to expand on or clarify information from the first interview. With your permission, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Your identity will remain confidential, but parts of your interview and/or direct quotes from the interviews may be used in Ms. Picardo's thesis without sharing any identifying information. If you would like, a summary of the results will be sent to you once the study is completed.

Taking part in this study is voluntary and you may refuse to take part or withdraw at any time. More details will be given when you provide your informed consent prior to the interview. If you would like to learn more about the study or would like to take part, please contact Rochelle Picardo by email or phone number listed at the beginning of this letter.

Sincerely,

Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Principal Investigator
University of British Columbia

Rochelle Picardo, B.A.
M.A. Student in School Psychology
Co-Investigator
University of British Columbia

APPENDIX G: CONSENT FORM

Foster Parent of Children with Special Needs: Experiences with School Involvement Parent Consent

Principal Investigator: Laurie Ford, Ph.D.
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology & Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx

Student Co-Investigator: Rochelle Picardo
Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology & Special
Education
Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx
Email: xxxxxxxx@xxxx

Dear Foster Parent/Caregiver,

Please read the following carefully. This is a request for you to take part in the study we are doing with foster parents of a child receiving special education services in school. If, after reading this letter, you would like to take part in this research study, please sign one copy and keep the other copy for your records.

Purpose:

The purpose of the study is to understand the experiences of foster parents who are caring for a child with special needs, and specifically those experiences related to becoming involved with the child's school. We are talking to foster parents who are caring for a child with identified special needs to better understand: 1) their perceptions/ experiences with school involvement, and 2) their experiences with the process of getting education services for their foster child.

Research Study Participation:

1. Taking part in the study means that you will take part in a one-to-one interview about your experiences receiving services for your foster child with identified special educational needs including your relationship with the school, your perception of terminology used in special education, your experience with meetings with school personnel, your experience getting information about your child from school personnel, and the process of working with school staff to plan an educational program for your child.
2. The interview will take place at your home or another location mutually agreed upon that is quiet, private, and works well for you.
3. The initial interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1.5 hours. We might ask if you would like to take part in a follow up interview. If so, we will decide that at the end of the first interview and the 2nd interview will not last more than an hour.
4. The interview will be audio-recorded and notes will also be taken. After the interview, the researcher will transcribe the audio recording.

5. If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to answer a background questionnaire following the interview.
6. After the interview is transcribed the researchers will contact you to give you an opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, clarification, and need for any changes. This may take up to 30 minutes and will be done in person or over the phone, your choice. If it is done over the phone, the transcript will be emailed to you in advance in a password protected file so you have it in front of you review while we talk with you.
7. We are not aware of any risks if you take part in the study. If, however, you feel uncomfortable, you may choose to stop at any time. If any of the questions in the interview make you feel uncomfortable, you may choose not to respond to those questions. You are welcome to contact us with any questions.
8. Taking part in the study means that you agree to the information being used for the purpose of reporting the results of the research in presentations or publication without the inclusion of any information that would identify you or your child.
9. The information you give us is strictly confidential. **No individual information will be reported and no participant identified by name** in any reports about the study. The information collected will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and any electronic files will be password protected and encrypted at the university office of the researchers. The only people who will have access to the information you give us are the researchers working on this study.
10. To thank you for your time, each person who takes part in the study will receive a \$15 gift card to a local business. The researchers will also provide child-care on-site if needed.
11. If, at any time, you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a person who takes part in our project, you may contact the Research Participant Complaint Line in the UBC Office of Research Services at the University of British Columbia at xxx-xxx-xxxx or if long distance at xxxxxx@xxxx or call toll free at x-xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Consent to Participate in this Research Project

By signing below, it means you consent to take part in this research study. When you sign below is also means that you have received a copy of this consent form for your own records.

Your Name (Please Print)

Your Signature

Date

Additional Questions

If you would like a summary of our results upon completion of the study, please indicate below and provide your email and mailing address so we can send you a copy.

_____ Yes, I would like a summary of the research when your work is completed.

Email: _____ OR

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APPENDIX H: PARTICIPANT QUOTES BY THEME/ SUBTHEME

Broad Theme	Subtheme	Quotes
Foster Parent Involvement	Involvement Actions	<p>Um... I would've been involved at home just helping him study, because at that time I was becoming a teacher, I was doing my long term practicum when he was living with me.</p> <p>In the summer I put him in day camps, because he was also very hyperactive.</p> <p>So I sit here, and they come here, and I put on the timer. And for five minutes, one person reads, one prints, and one does something else.</p> <p>...and I talk to the boys about their IEP, I read them their IEP.</p> <p>...anything he's done outside the school whether it's taking swimming lessons, going to gymnastics, I have done.</p> <p>...but he would get to a point where he would get so frustrated that instead of asking questions to try to understand it he would just deflect and cause large disruptions in the class, like huge. So I would spend a lot of time at the school.</p> <p>...so that's how I was able to get closer with his teachers as well because I was at the school all the time. I was always there asking how he was doing, checking up on his homework, checking up on his behaviour. His... you know just everything he was doing, like how many times he'd be in the hallways, and you know that sort of thing so I made my presence known...</p> <p>I would call them all the time about appointments, if they called me about stuff, I would talk to his principal and vice principal quite a bit, and I'd also go talk to his teachers at least two or three times a week.</p> <p>...but yeah no, I was always there and even now, closer to the beginning of the school year I was there a couple of times because there were things that had happened so I had gone to the school.</p> <p>... and I was getting called to school meetings all the time (laughs) or called to pick up Aidan early from school.</p> <p>I have since been in IEP meetings—like I was in an IEP meeting there with a teacher who wasn't his fulltime teacher who had never been in an IEP meeting before. At the annex I had been in an IEP meeting with the vice principal who was also the resource teacher who had never done an</p>

		<p>IEP meeting before...(laughs) so now I've been in situations where it's kind of...oh I actually know more what's going on than you!</p> <p>And all of a sudden, I have communication books, and I take these to school every day and, so every day I write something so, here's, like Thursday May 9..."Good morning Ms. Singh, he had a very hard time getting up this morning, he had a late night...went to bed one a half hours later than usual because he kept getting out of bed. Have a great day!" And she writes back. Uhm...oh it was a student teacher, he was away or whatever.</p> <p>Because...well how can you help them if you don't know what the goals are?</p> <p>And then, I... sometimes I stop by there, like, I've stopped by there with like gifts, I brought lunch one day, you know, coming to events, things like that. You know...and then...through email, things like that.</p> <p>And then just, the IEP, like we follow, you know I get out the IEP...I worked in business for a long time and I had a business plan, so I consider the IEP a business plan.</p>
	<p>Teacher Characteristics Valued by Foster Parents</p>	<p>Teachers who were willing to listen to my perspective? (laughs) It's awkward when they're like, oh we don't see-- and there are two ways to say we're not seeing that in the classroom. It can be like a. "Oh, that's really fascinating, I wonder why there's a difference between home and classroom, let's think through why things may be coming across differently in different environments, versus just like, we don't see any of that here, guess it's okay, you must be crazy..."</p> <p>I feel like it's whether they seem to believe me or not, I think like it's the same...like some of them I just feel like they think I'm this overprotective, I'm reading prenatal exposure into everything, I think everything's wrong with my kid because they came from someone else. Like...I don't know.</p> <p>Feel free to email me any time...uhm...like a welcoming, welcoming position. "Thank you so much for coming in." Like oh okay, they really want me there. They want communication, they're happy to work with me, they're happy for this to be a partnership.</p> <p>They both cared about him quite a bit and they both wanted him to succeed and they actually were both very open and happy to have me come and check up on him and they were very...they</p>

		<p>both expressed that they wanted more help for him.</p> <p>And she loves her job, so I think first of all they have to love being a teacher. They have to actually love being a teacher.</p> <p>And I think they have to have a vested interest, like um, what she'll say about Gregory is she's rooting for him, that she is absolutely rooting for that kid, you know. Um...and I think the other thing is they can't take things personally. They can't take what I say, they can't take what the kids do...or say, personally.</p> <p>The teachers that I've come across have all just been really, really great. So my experience with them is really good, it's not—and they're all very respectful, they all talk very kindly, appropriately.</p>
	Advocacy	<p>I remember at one meeting being like...the teacher was like, half the kids in my class have IEPs, like Adam's fine. I was like, okay, but let's just for a minute pretend he was at a school 10 blocks down... and then the resource teacher was like, ohhhh Adam's file would look totally different if we were at a different school! And I'm like...okay let's just stay on that page for a second here! Uhm...and if I'd talk about the things we were experiencing at home his teacher was just like, "oh that's so weird, I don't see any of that here."</p> <p>I kept pushing for that, I kept asking his teachers, what can we do for him, and it always came down to, there's no diagnosis, there's no...there's no psych reports, there's no...the only thing they had was the psych-ed report, but that was the only thing.</p> <p>I pushed for an EA, I kept trying to get one...</p>
Involvement Challenges Related to Foster Parent Role	Disagreement about Child's Needs	<p>I was supposed to be inviting birth mom to every single medical...medical thing. Uhm...and eventually...eventually I stopped, cause I was like, I can't do these medical, because she's giving one opinion and then I can't tell about what I'm seeing in the home now, and she's saying her kids are fine.</p> <p>And then the birth mom was supposed to meet us there, which created this weird dynamic. She actually went into the meeting...the assessment with him. I didn't. So I just kind of milled around with the other...</p> <p>Ya, I remember going to a meeting for Aidan pretty close to the beginning. I do remember the social worker was at that one...or...yeah. She was at that one. And then I remember having to</p>

		<p>re-have the meeting, because birth mom had not been at that meeting. And the school felt so bad that she had not been included that we had like, re-had the meeting, and the social worker was not there at that time. Cause they were very intentional at that school...about including birth mom. I don't think they would've...maybe they would've redone the meeting if I wasn't there. Maybe not. Uhm...but I remember being really awkward because then we were doing this like birth mom foster mom...</p> <p>To this day, I, I honestly believe Dad doesn't believe that there's anything wrong with him. But he doesn't understand the psychology of it, like Dad was an addict as well so he doesn't understand the psychology of how kids' brains work or anything.</p> <p>And he... because he was home, Mom and Dad didn't see any...of the psych, like...they just saw that he acted out a lot, and he misbehaved, and he was very destructive, and very violent, uhm...but neither one of them thought to seek help. Because both parents were addicts, they saw the ministry as bad.</p> <p>And, the hard part is to see him go home and to see the way he returns...uhm, and the way he's reacting to when he knows he's going home.</p> <p>And the thing is too (I was so mad)—because uhm...Dad...so, the reason why they even got into Sunnyhill is because I took them to the doctors and I went to mental health...took them in...uhm...to do all the psych evaluations and everything, right. His dad was against it but because he no longer—at the moment it was the social worker that had guardian ship, so he didn't have a say at the moment. Dad found out he'd have to go in everyday for a week, Dad said no.</p> <p>They were supposed to be transferred to the grief counselor here in Surrey, but because Dad wasn't willing to take them, they didn't go.</p>
	Role Confusion	<p>I remember being uncertain because obviously Aidan needs a full time EA. I'm like, does he have-like, is this sorted out? Does the school have...I have no idea how the school, like for Kindergarten transition, like for newly diagnosed kids starting- for kids starting kindergarten I have no idea what the process looks like, for getting their...whether they have the diagnosis or not.</p> <p>Like I didn't know what my place was, especially that first year because there was so much focus on, these kids are going home, keep the mom in the loop. So it was like who...who</p>

		<p>am I? What's my role? What am I in this situation?</p> <p>It was a great day the day I walked in there with those custody papers. This is who... It's just defining, too, foster parent is such a weird box, it's like who am I, I'm just in between, its neither here nor there, versus...</p> <p>By the letter of the law I'd be the guardian, but I check off mom because I go with what they're ...I feel like what they're asking, I feel like it's more in line...I'm not the social worker, I'm not the guardian. For all intents and purposes I'm the mom so I check off mom.</p> <p>...and that's the thing though too, when I initially got them, I'm like, well am I supposed to take them to the dentist, to the doctor, and social worker said yep, just do whatever you want to do.</p>
	Logistical Challenges	<p>...and the longer the kids were here, then we started having more appointments, like when I look back we actually hardly had any, cause I remember counting, the first year I had the kids...maybe the second year, 2015...the kids came in 2014, but in 2015 I had 100 appointments, not including BI therapy stuff.</p> <p>Everything was awful. You're trying to get out the door and be on time for the appointment.</p> <p>Plus I was super ticked because me leaving the house to do anything was so hard and the post office I had to go pick it up from had no parking.</p> <p>...and it being so challenging to get to the meetings because I had these other two kids on my plate too. So how are you even supposed to get to these meetings?</p> <p>I was on top of it. Appointments, the whole bit.</p> <p>I needed some information changed, and they wouldn't change it because my name wasn't on, I'm like what're you talking about? But it didn't make sense because the other secretary did it, but this one wouldn't do it, so I had to get the social worker to do it...but it wasn't so much that she didn't want to talk to me or anything she...was following protocols.</p>
	Stigma	<p>...and partly people are just like looking at you like, why do you have six kids. And why do you have three kids who were born early, like really, you had a 28 weeker who's brain damaged, and then you proceeded to get pregnant two more</p>

		<p>times and had another kid who was in NICU? Like... (laughing) which is like maybe not the right reason to disclose... or we start talking about FAS and I don't want people to think that like... I don't know, I don't want people to think that I drank with my kids!</p> <p>Which... I don't want to be the hero, but I think people... there's also the perspective where people will just totally disregard, or like, oh the poor kids, or oh, their first mom must be a total loser or, how could she ever leave her kids. And I don't want that either, like we love her... that's not... I don't need that either.</p> <p>although I must admit, this is my ego—when something came up, she was sort of bullying some other kids and she stole a watch from me, the school had her talking about it with one of her friends and so they told me—I lost my track of thought here. I forgot what I was gonna say. Oh, um, right, there was no reason to tell them she was a foster kid because she could've easily been mine, but when all that bad behaviour came up, I told them, because I didn't want it to reflect on me! And I was telling her, I said don't forget, and I do, I said just like a regular parent, your behaviour reflects on me! And it does.</p> <p>I dunno if they treated me this way but I think I had, and because they had a history, and because the birth parents are very likable people, I guess I felt like an intruder. I felt like the bad person, as the foster parent. Even though I wasn't responsible for the removal, I wasn't the social worker. But I still felt like I was the... the takeover, or something?</p> <p>Some places people don't like foster-adoptive families and other places people think you're a hero.</p>
Training/ Resources	Training/ Resources from Ministry	<p>Like not having any training or resources and having... like the four kid thing was insane and I couldn't leave the baby, she could only be left with someone who did an additional two day training, so even if I had... even to get a break it has to be someone who's crim checked, and then you have to have someone who can actually manage your kids and then I couldn't leave the infant cause you had to have an additional two day training through the ministry and I couldn't leave them in anybody's home cause you basically had to have a home study to drop my kids anywhere else, so it's just like... no break for you.</p> <p>Eventually when I asked they gave me more respite money, but I had to ask. They eventually... just like financial compensation</p>

	<p>which you had to ask for, like before I fostered they said they'd pay half my rent so I had gotten a bigger place, and then they didn't do that til like 5 months in, and then just like that they wrote a cheque and increased my respite money by like...it was significant, by like, I don't know and extra 500 dollars a month for respite, and half the rent was like...like around 14 or something but it was like all of a sudden just like that they gave like another two and a half thousand dollars a month, but we were five months in and I had to ask for it as a brand new foster parent.</p> <p>They were aware I had too much on my plate but instead of adding stuff in they were just saying they were gonna split them up.</p> <p>And it was just super stressful. And I didn't understand how the...I really didn't understand how the court process worked. For, uhm...I'd gone to training, I feel like they should've covered this in training a lot more, they kind of overviewed how it, but I didn't understand like...there's removal, and they need to go to court within the first- I can't even remember now, there's a 45 day interim order they ask for and there's TCO time and then—Like I knew kids under 5 years now aren't supposed to spend more than 12 months in care...which I don't understand.</p> <p>...except for maybe the um, foster parent training, it was 52 hours of um, workshops and things to do over the course of the year. A year? 2 years. And none of it was relevant to the school system.</p> <p>...part of the reason why the referrals were put in late is because I was a brand new foster parent.</p> <p>And I was so lost, I'm like do I need to get your permission, do I need to have a certain...is there a protocol. They weren't saying anything. They wouldn't tell me anything. I just had to go and figure it out.</p> <p>Because those first few years a lot of things were kept from me, and a lot of it had to do with money.</p> <p>And the thing is too, like...it's in the, it's in the, uhm...the handbook, but I'm not gonna read the whole bloody handbook. No one's sitting there reading the whole bloody handbook.</p> <p>...it all came down, see the thing is, every single thing that I find that has happened with these kids all comes down to money. Money. There's</p>
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	<p>Personal Characteristics/ Resources</p>	<p>I mean, it was super challenging for me, particularly in the beginning, but I have a lot more cards in my deck from which to draw.</p> <p>I don't understand how... I was gonna say, how the birth moms are supposed to, and I'm not saying all moms of kids who are in care are...lower functioning, but statistically, there's less education, there's less...I have...like people always say to me, I don't know how you did it...howwww birth moms held on for as long as they did? Like I have way more cards in my deck. And I don't mean smarts in my head, I mean just like life cards that are dealt to me.</p> <p>I have parents who fly from Ontario to help me, I</p>

		<p>have no residential school in my past, I have no—I don't even have divorce in my family, we have no addiction...there was never alcohol in my house when I was growing up (laughing).</p> <p>That I remember being better, um and I also knew her mental health worker, I used to work with her? And um...so she would share with me stuff that, you know at work she would tell me little things she found out, not without disclosing anything—err, without disclosing anything she would keep me in the loop with MCFD stuff, so that actually, that was actually a good, very supportive relationship...</p> <p>So yes I do think that because I was independent, because I was handling most of the things myself, financially and emotionally that when I did ask for something I got it. I was a good advocate for sure. I think that helped.</p> <p>Free stuff, stuff from relatives, and that like you know that sort of thing and that's how I was able set myself up. And then I'm finding out from other foster parents, that's what they did too. That they...they got a lot of like, you know, free stuff and like...and they had to you know, just kind of had to revamp what they had, that sort of thing. Like... cribs, car seats, all of that, we pay for ourselves.</p> <p>I have some foster parent friends now, that we...you know, I have some support groups.</p> <p>I always have a dresser full of stuff, a bunch of fab fit fun stuff, I'll go to the dollar store and buy stuff at the dollar store all the time or whatever. So I just let her go shopping in my closet, and that just you know changed everything. And the dog is a big game changer.</p> <p>Oh, yeah. Did I ever want for a meal? No. Did the power ever go out? No. Was I ever abused in any way shape or form? No. Did I ever feel unsafe? No.</p>
Support	Support from Ministry	<p>I lost 10 years off my life somewhere there. Uhhmm...yeah, just huge learning curve, not being given support or resources. Like I was given no support or resources, any that I had I did on my own.</p> <p>I never ever had a social worker come to a single medical appointment.</p> <p>I sent out, probably six seven emails, "Hi, still asking for this, still asking for this, still asking for this"...but I was asking for everything a million times and not getting it so you're also...ya, I feel bad, they're busy, they're</p>

		<p>overworked, they have too much on their plate, I know that, so I'm also trying not to be too irritating but, also, like...what am I supposed to do.</p> <p>All of a sudden, I email her for something and I get this automated response back. Uhm...saying that she's on mat leave?</p> <p>They weren't very present. They certainly weren't emotionally involved, which is fair enough. You can't be. You can't survive in the job, there's such a high turnover as I'm sure you know.</p> <p>...you're basically on your own. Emotionally, psychologically, you're definitely on your own.</p> <p>...contacted me so we could get a hold of the social worker, because they couldn't get a hold of the social worker.</p> <p>...she said we don't give you respite, we don't give respite. That's what the social worker that I had kept saying to me. And I kept telling her, I'm like I need break. I need a day away. I need a break. Bordering tears.</p> <p>I mean, my experience with that is that the social workers a lot of the time didn't get involved until the principal called them in.</p> <p>Uhm... A lot of the social workers so far that I've had is, I just take the permission slip to the social worker's office, they sign it, and then that's and then I take it back to the school.</p>
	Support from Schools	<p>...that school cared very deeply for those kids.</p> <p>Well he had no classroom teacher at the beginning, so they had like, a sub for a week, and then they had another sub, and then they had a fill-in and then they hired someone but she was on a mat leave until February...so then they had...but...this probably sucks but at least we had the same—knowing he had his EA the whole time</p> <p>I think if I can see follow-up, like if I can see that our conversations have meaning, like if something needed to change, and we put that, like if we discuss something and then they do something about it...that kind of stuff. Teachers who will say "Come in and talk to me anytime."</p> <p>I knew that birth mom didn't know...she would show up randomly at the playground at the old school, and the school would call me, they were supportive, they were definitely supportive in that way. They'd be like, oh...they even like</p>

		<p>took money or boxes of cookies of the kids and they'd be like, we have it it's in the office, you can decide what to do with this. ...they could do no wrong as far as I was concerned, cause it was all about him and he was really happy there.</p> <p>So yeah I think they were as supported as they possibly could have been. I mean short of waving a magic wand right?</p> <p>it was a lot of talking to the secretaries. Secretary staff know everything. They know all the kids, they know who's in trouble, who's getting awards, you know they know everything...</p> <p>In every school, I haven't had any issues.</p> <p>I'd say it's really good. They have a ...yeah, a really...so they have like a resource teacher who sort of handles this...these kinds of kids I guess? I wouldn't say it's sort of a typical school because it's a pretty upscale.</p> <p>But what they lack in that, they make up for in a willingness to do whatever it takes, hire good quality people, and be adaptive, and...like you know, they give me these books, they suggest I ask, they even take him to gymnastics.</p> <p>I hope whatever school they end up in next year here, is very similar, really symbiotic.</p> <p>I think they're doing a really good job within the confines of what, you know, but I mean let's face it, teaching, the curriculum hasn't changed...</p> <p>I'm not criticizing them, I think they're doing a great job and they're really really flexible with anything I've suggested. They're willing to put the resources behind or whatever?</p>
Sharing of Information	Uncertainty about the Future	<p>I remember coming home and being like, "The kids might go home today. I have no idea. The kids might totally get returned today."</p> <p>It's a very weird...it's also very weird to have kids in your home that you don't know if they're coming or going, you don't know if they're staying, you don't know if they're going home.</p> <p>And like, this elusive box of...are you coming, are you going, I mean it was a one week placement to begin with, extended by a month, then extended another three months...and then it was extended by six months at one point, so it's like, oh okay...and then after that, it was this constant, oh, we're sending them to the reserve, we need to split them up...and you're just like,</p>

		<p>one point they were talking about returning some home...</p> <p>I could ask them til they're blue in the face when do you think this kid's going home and they have no idea.</p> <p>... it's kept me up at night, I've thrown up.</p>
	Information Shared by Schools	<p>I literally didn't know that the 10-year-old had an FAS diagnosis until the end of the first year of school when all of a sudden I realized... wait a sec, if he has an IEP, that means he has some sort of... like he would have to have a diagnosis, you don't just get an IEP for no reason.</p> <p>So then I asked the school about that report and the secretary was like, I I'm not really supposed to give this to you but here... and it was like an FAS- it was the short, a short version?</p> <p>... and then I'm in an awkward spot cause now I have this document I'm not really supposed to... have...</p> <p>I don't even know why I clued in, I think I just kind of woke up around June or something, I don't know, and I was like... maybe when his June report card came in or something... and I was like, "wait, this kid has an IEP, why does he have an IEP? He doesn't have a diagnosis! Wait, but if he has an IEP, he must have a diagnosis."</p>
	Information Shared by Ministry	<p>And I go in and they're like asking me background and I'm like, I have no idea, how about you tell me whatever you can. I know nothing.</p> <p>... please look in your file and tell me anything you're allowed to tell me because...</p> <p>I mean, in that sense it would totally depend on who it was, like who... um... absolutely I was given limited, when I was at an appointment, it would totally depend on who the person was and if they were a rule follower, or if they were more, I know what the rule is, but... common sense prevails and this person who is actually caring for the child, needs to know.</p> <p>I don't think the social workers were aware of a lot of it. The social workers didn't have... some of their records they have, some they didn't. I spent probably a year and a half asking the social worker for Aidan's full autism assessment...</p> <p>And some of the reports they didn't have, so I'd be like, you need to ask the doctor for this report.</p> <p>I do think the school should know. I think it should be a Q-code—not a learning designation</p>

		<p>but it should be on file, that they're in um...that they're a guardian of this province, that should be on file.</p> <p>I never did, I never communicated with school, I kept that all private. Except for that one time when she was basically preying on younger girls, that, we had to have all the cards on the table. Kind of thing...but I never, ever reported anything to the school about him. He would KILL me. He was very pri—one to keep it very private.</p> <p>...so, but the social worker didn't even tell me about this til almost...he was home. That first year was really hard because, no, you know the kids were troubling and everything but it was really hard to work with the ministry because they don't tell you anything.</p> <p>Yeah. They don't tell you anything until you figure it out on your own. They don't want you to know because then you're gonna push for it.</p>
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