

# Meeting the Needs of the Foster Child: Perceptions of the K-6 Teacher

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*Abstract: A growing number of children are entering the foster care system every year. The trauma experienced by these children negatively impacts them. This current study sought to determine the perceptions of foster children by thirty-six teacher participants. The results indicate a need to increase teacher's awareness of foster children and the unique challenges they face. This study has brought a heightened awareness of the teachers' perceptions towards this growing population of students relative to the challenges facing foster children. Teachers must be aware of the issues these students face while providing adequate interventions to meet the needs of these students.*

*Keywords: Foster care, Diversity, Achievement gap, Professional development.*

## Introduction

This survey study sought to determine current K-6 teachers' perceptions of teaching foster children in the elementary and middle school classroom. Thirty-six teachers participated in the study by sharing their perceptions of foster children in the classroom through responses to a survey. There has been limited research relating to teachers' knowledge and perceptions of foster children's needs. This study sought to further research by determining current teachers' perceptions of foster children. The survey results indicated the necessity for increasing awareness among teachers regarding foster children's unique needs and challenges.

## Theoretical Framework

Studies on attachment theory are largely based on the work of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby "revolutionized our thinking about a child's tie to the mother and its disruption through separation, deprivation, and bereavement" (Bretherton 1992, 759.) Infants display behaviors of attachment such as "orienting, crying, clinging, signaling, and proximity-seeking" (Carlson 1998, 1107). Bowlby worked to provide an empirical explanation that children need a continuous relationship with a caregiver to thrive emotionally (Bretherton 1992). He contended that "grief and mourning processes in children and adults appear whenever attachment behaviors are activated but the attachment figure continues to be unavailable" (Bretherton 1992, 770). "Early exposure to trauma may have detrimental effects on neurological organization" (as cited in Carlson 1998, 1123). Through her research, Carlson (1998) concluded, "...disorganization, behavior problems, and parent child boundary problems independently predict psychopathology, the combination of these experiences best accounts for the occurrence of psychopathology in adolescence" (1123).

## The Foster Care System

Jensen (1998) states, "An infant's relationship with its primary caretaker often determines whether the child develops learning problems" (19). Abuse and violence can literally reorganize the brain, causing behavior that is more aggressive (Jensen 1998). "Trauma has negative behavioral, emotional, neurobiological, and developmental repercussions throughout children's schooling and their adult life" (Statman-Weil 2015, 73). Regrettably, children across

the nation are being removed from their homes at alarming rates due to many issues, but largely due to abuse. In 2012, the Administration for Children & Families reported that 493,000 children in the United States were in foster care at some point during that year. Education Week (Jacobson 2008) reports the number of children in care at any given time to now be over 700,000.

Some children are put into foster care because of the death of the parent or legal guardian. This trauma turns the child's life upside-down, especially if they were attached to the parent(s). More often, however, removal occurs when the state Department of Child and Family Services (DCFS) determines that a child's current living placement is inadequate. This judgment is made when a child is in immediate danger whether from physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect. Therefore, the foster care home primarily acts as a temporary home to provide abused or neglected children with a safe-haven (Child Trends 2011). The department will remove the child from that environment and place them into a foster care placement deemed to be a safe and stable living environment. This may be a temporary or permanent removal, as determined by the local court. Children are not only separated from their parents under these circumstances, but they can be separated from siblings if a foster home cannot be found that can care for all of the children removed. For a sibling group of five, the needs of the children may be too great, or there may not be enough room in one home to place them together. DCFS strives to keep as much of the family safely intact for the child or children involved, but due to rising numbers of children placed into foster care, and the limited amount of available foster care homes, C. Arnold, Unit Supervisor White County DCFS, reported that finding foster homes for sibling groups challenges DCFS (personal communication, June 6, 2008).

### ***The Foster Care Home***

When these families separate, the children have to adjust to a new family system and environment. A new set of relationships must form, which according to Gilligan (1998) can include, "...family, care setting, school, peer group, neighbourhood, workplace, and leisure time interests and activities" (187). Children may be placed in cities or counties far away from their original home requiring new school settings, friends, neighbors, and mentors depending on open placement options. The child may have been the oldest sibling, but in the new foster care setting, may now be the youngest sibling.

Some foster homes provide only emergency care, and the child is moved to another, more permanent placement, within days or weeks from the original removal. Placements for foster children can disrupt due to personal problems of the foster parent, which are unrelated to the foster child. Other placements disrupt because of adverse behavior from the children. Each new placement is another major trauma in the life of the foster child. From the researcher's personal experience, it is not uncommon to encounter foster children as young as three years of age who have experienced five or more placements. In an interview with R. Denney, a middle school principal and former elementary principal, he told of a Kindergartner in his school who was in his 20<sup>th</sup> foster care placement. The child had many behavior problems and is very difficult to teach in the classroom.

The children experience many changes; these changes in turn link to problems in academics and behavior. Foster families and other caregivers need to be able to discern from these problems what is normal childhood development or typical dysfunctional behavior from behaviors consistent with characteristics of disorders that require more trained and specialized attention, such as Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD), Anxiety Disorders, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

### ***Effects of Abuse***

As Jensen (2008) suggests, children detached from their caregiver or who encounter abuse can experience a severe affect on their brains' development and their ability to succeed in school due to academic or behavior problems. "Children who experience trauma are two-and-a-

half times more likely to fail a grade in school than their nontraumatized peers” (Statman-Weil 2015, 73). When children do not develop a healthy attachment to their caregiver, this can create difficulties for the child emotionally, socially, and academically. Attachment has a direct influence on the child’s success in school (Bergin & Bergin 2009).

Dysfunctional caregiver relationships can cause various disorders in the developing brain. One disorder linked to attachment issues is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). “The link between attachment security and ADHD symptoms may be due to its effect on emotion regulation and anxiety” (Bergin & Bergin 2009, 149). Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD) is another common disorder related to attachment issues. It can be misdiagnosed because characteristics of several behavior disorders, such as ADHD are similar.

According to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) (APA 2000) there are two types of RAD, inhibited and disinhibited. The inhibited type deals with an inability to respond appropriately in social contexts. A child with an inhibited form of RAD seldom responds to or seeks out comfort. In the classroom, it might be the child who is bullied, but withdraws and does not react or report the incident to an adult. This avoidant behavior is a defense mechanism to suppress their negative emotions (Bergin & Bergin 2009). The disinhibited type relates more with an inability to appropriately attach to others, or an indiscriminate attachment. If there is a new adult in the classroom such as a substitute teacher or student teacher, the RAD disinhibited subtype tries to hold his or her hand, tells them, “I wish I could go home with you,” or hangs over their shoulder with lots of positive socialization body language within the first day of their being in the classroom. Often these children have exaggerated emotions which can include tantrums or pouting (Bergin & Bergin 2009).

Teachers, mentors and caregivers need to ensure that these children receive a correct diagnosis in order to begin the healing process through beneficial strategies and interventions. In addition, caregivers should be alert to behavioral manifestations of similar disorders. For example, students with broken attachments and diagnosed with ADHD should be monitored to see if there is an impulse control problem (associated with ADHD) or if it is a social relatedness problem (more in line with the characteristics of RAD). In order to close the achievement gap, teachers need to be able to understand the differences in learning and motivation that foster children portray. Equipped with the proper knowledge about the differences in which foster children perceive and experience schooling, the teacher can hold high and appropriate expectations for this population of students (Herrington, Kidd-Herrington, & Kritsonis 2006).

“One of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (IDEA) 1999 Revisions addressed the role of foster parents in special education decisions relevant to Individual Education Programs (IEPs)” (Palladino 2006, 22). The revision invited foster parents to discuss the educational needs and strategies that children with disabilities will receive (IDEA 2004). There is nothing about being a foster child that would in and of itself warrant an IEP since it is not a documented disability that adversely affects education. According to Zetlin, Weinberg and Kimm (2003), when a teacher is not adequately involved as well as informed about a child’s foster care situation, the teacher cannot adjust curricula, pace, or teaching methods. The child’s educational and emotional needs get lost in the shuffle.

Buenning (2007) created a checklist to help clinicians diagnose RAD. This checklist includes behaviors and dispositions that are common characteristics observed consistently in a diagnosis of RAD. These include, but not limited to, being oppositional, argumentative, and defiant, with frequent or intense angry outbursts, being manipulative or controlling displaying little or no remorse, and being destructive to self, others, and property (Buenning 2007). The symptoms of RAD are similar to other behavior disorders such as: Attention Deficit with Hyper-Activity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD), and Conduct Disorder (CD). Moorer (2007) said, “... even if an attachment disturbance is suspected, it may be overlooked or misdiagnosed” (2).

Foster children may display behavioral problems such as aggressiveness, noncompliance, impulsivity depending upon the type of abuse or neglect experienced prior to foster care placement (Knauss & Geroski 2000). Often, foster parents request children be moved to a new placement because they feel incapable of dealing with these types of learned behaviors. A child who has very challenging behaviors may go through many foster care placements. Unfortunately, with each new placement another attachment is broken, so the behaviors consistent with a diagnosis of RAD continue to increase, thus the chances of the next placement disrupting also increases. Each broken attachment for a child has the potential to affect that child's ability to form a trusting caregiver/child relationship in the future. The child may also have to change school districts if the only foster home available is in another city or county. Any existing positive relationships at school are broken abruptly and new ones must form. A child may be in this new school and home environment any length of time; often, it is unknown when the child is placed how long the placement will last.

### ***Long-Term Impact of Foster Care***

Many children "age out" of the foster care system with poor adjustment into adulthood. It appears the foster placement setting has a great impact on the child's future adaptation success. Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper (2001) said, "... children from foster family care are more likely than children in group or institutional care to grow into well-functioning adults..." (785). In their research, some children went home within four months. Many more stayed in care much longer. Foster children with behavior problems became transient within the system of foster care. Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper (2001) concluded, "...research into foster care implies that there is a sizeable group of children for whom foster family care is likely to be a highly unsettling experience that is not associated with positive developmental outcomes" (785). Given the predictability of unsatisfactory transition to foster care for conduct-disordered adolescents, then, it is reasonable to conclude that foster family care is simply unsuitable for these children. These children are at high risk of "foster care drift", or wandering from foster home to foster home, neither returning to their families nor settling down with alternative careers (Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper 2001, 789). Barber, Delfabbro, and Cooper (2001) also suggest more placement options be developed and sustained for children with disruptive behavior.

### ***The K-6 Classroom***

So, what does this mean for the classroom teacher? "Attachment influences school success through two routes: indirectly through attachment to parents, and directly through attachment to teachers and schools" (Bergin & Bergin 2009, 141). Classrooms are affected because students may be in the classroom only a few weeks or more, so the students do not get a connected education or develop a healthy attachment to the teachers and school. They cannot be diagnosed with disorders if they do not stay in a school system long enough for the detection of dysfunctional patterns of behaviors or cognitive deficiencies, or if the child moves on before any interventions can occur. According to Herrington, Kidd-Herrington, and Kritsonis (2006), teachers can begin to close the learning gaps of foster children only when they acknowledge the unique needs of foster children. The teachers may not be aware of the child's need or may feel incapable of helping if they do not have a strong knowledge base about the needs or characteristics of foster children. If a child has been highly mobile, an accurate Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or Section 504 Plan may not be in place. Without proper educational plans and adequate teacher training, foster children are at risk of slipping through the cracks of the educational system.

Teachers are an especially important part of the healing process for children facing the trauma of foster care and the preceding events of abuse and/or neglect which led to placement (Jackson & Martin, 1998). "To be effective, teachers must connect with and care for children with warmth, respect, and trust" (Bergin & Bergin 2009, 150). Teachers spend more time with

the children than others involved and can provide a consistency that other environments cannot provide at that time. Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2003) commented:

Abused or neglected children, particularly those who must be removed from their parents' custody and placed in foster care, are at tremendous risk educationally. This risk is compounded exponentially when neither child welfare agencies (CWAs) nor school districts attend to the educational needs of this highly at-risk population of children  
(105).

Unless a teacher has been directly involved in the life of a foster child (either being one themselves at one time or keeping one in their own home), it is difficult for that teacher to understand the true impact of procedures and events that occur at school on the life of a child in foster care (Herrington, Kidd-Herrington, & Kritsonis 2006). "A caring teacher has to work to disconfirm insecure children's expectation that the teacher will be hostile, rejecting, or unresponsive" (Bergin & Bergin 2009, 155).

Some studies revealed teachers' lack of knowledge of the needs of foster children. For instance, Cormier (1994) conducted a qualitative study examining teacher experiences with teaching foster children and concluded, "Even though the educators had a vast background of experiences, they all agreed that they had had no education, preparation, training or experience to adequately prepare themselves to cope with or to teach children who were in foster care placement" (Cormier 1994, 11). One teacher in Palladino's (2006) study commented, "no administrator ever tells him if a particular student resides in foster care" (25). Teachers cannot know every need of every child in their care; principals cannot convey every piece of this information puzzle – especially if they do not know every piece either. But Cormier and Palladino both agreed that teachers need more instruction on the needs of foster children and what interventions or strategies could best serve this population. Palladino (2006) stated, "a need exists for empirical studies about intervention strategies employed on the youth's behalf" (30).

Attachment theory suggests that a child's opportunity and ability to attach is a strong predictor of that child's later success in various areas in life (Bergin & Bergin 2009). With the number of displaced children rising, teachers will encounter a larger portion of students who exhibit behaviors consistent with a diagnosis of disorders such as ADHD, EBD, and RAD. These students have educational needs which differ from typically developing children (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm (2003).

Teachers' perceptions affect the performance of their students. When teachers have negative or positive expectations of their students, it affects the student's achievement. This is most often seen in what is most commonly referred to as self-fulfilling prophecy. Sommers (2000) relays a story of a sixth-grade teacher who was teaching an unruly class. The teacher researched the students and found their IQ numbers to be very high. With this knowledge, she changed her expectations of the students' academic and behavior performance. The students' achievement soared, only later to find out that the numbers were the children's locker numbers rather than IQ numbers. The teacher's perceptions towards the students guided her decisions about instructional material, expectations for assignments, and discipline procedures.

Bergin and Bergin (2009) provide six recommendations for how teachers can improve the school experience for the foster child:

- 1) Increase sensitivity and warm, positive interactions with students; 2) Be well prepared for class and hold high expectations for students; 3) Be responsive to students' agendas by providing choice whenever possible; 4) Use induction rather than coercive discipline. Induction involves explaining the reason for rules and pointing out the consequences of breaking rules. Coercive discipline involves using threats, imposing the teacher's superior power, and taking advantage of the teacher's ability to control resources like recess time, grades, or detentions; 5) Help students be kind, helpful, and

accepting of one another; and 6) Implement interventions for specific, difficult relationships (158-159).

Teachers must be prepared to deal with foster children, whose needs may vary from those of the typically developing child in terms of attachment problems such as RAD. Since teacher perceptions have been documented to affect student performance, the researcher examined teacher perceptions to explore current perceptions about foster children. Attending school can be a tumultuous experience for children, so an additional trauma for the child to work through brings increased debilitation. It is important for teachers to be knowledgeable about the needs of foster children, as knowledge affects perception.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of elementary and middle level teachers in a public school concerning foster children's academic ability and behavior in a regular classroom.

### ***Participants***

The research was conducted at a public school district in central Arkansas. A convenience sampling of teachers from three elementary schools and one middle school were included in the study. Thirty-six teachers currently teaching in a K-6 classroom participated in the study.

### ***Instrument***

The participants responded to a survey developed by the researchers to uncover teacher perceptions of foster children. The survey was used to examine the perceptions of teachers towards teaching foster children. More specifically, the survey consisted of ten Likert-type five-scale questions asking respondents to rate their degree of agreement with statements pertaining to the academic abilities and classroom behaviors of foster children. The instrument was created with the help and knowledge of a focus group of three former foster children, examined by an expert panel for content validity, and was pilot tested to a separate group of individuals for face validity.

One of the researchers interviewed a small group of former foster children to determine their challenges in the classroom. Concepts that emerged from the narratives were reviewed and used to form the survey questions, along with information from the review of literature, to create an instrument to determine teacher perceptions.

## **Procedures**

The survey instrument was distributed to the participants through the school district email system. Participants were allowed a two-month period of time to complete the survey. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. All survey responses were collected anonymously by the researchers through an online survey tool.

### ***Data Analysis***

The use of quantitative methodology to analyze data was used to determine the results of the survey. Survey results were analyzed to determine the frequency at which participants responded as strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree to each question on the survey.

## Results

Question one on the survey stated, “Foster children are capable of forming positive attachments/relationships with their peers.” Overwhelming, the participants agree with this statement with the majority strongly agreeing with this statement. 86% of the participants indicated that they agree or strongly agree with the statement. See Table 1.

Table 1

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	19	53%
<i>Agree</i>	12	33%
<i>Neutral</i>	5	14%
<i>Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

For question two, the participants were provided with the following statement: “If foster children misbehave, their misbehavior should be tolerated more than the misbehavior of other typically developing children’s should in the classroom.” The responses to this statement are more widely distributed, with the majority of participants, 42%, disagreeing with the statement. See Table 2.

Table 2

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	1	3%
<i>Agree</i>	4	11%
<i>Neutral</i>	11	30%
<i>Disagree</i>	15	42%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	5	14%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

Question three stated “Foster children have more behavior problems than other typically developing student do in the classroom.” The responses to this question were also widely distributed. However, the majority of participants, 56%, were neutral regarding their response to the question. See Table 3.

Table 3

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	1	3%
<i>Agree</i>	5	14%
<i>Neutral</i>	20	56%
<i>Disagree</i>	8	22%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	2	5%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

“Foster children feel included in the classroom” was question four. The majority of participants, 70%, agreed or strongly agreed in response to this statement with no participants strongly disagreeing and very few disagreeing with the statement. See Table 4.

Table 4

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	9	25%
<i>Agree</i>	16	45%
<i>Neutral</i>	8	22%
<i>Disagree</i>	3	8%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

The participants were provided with the following statement for question five: “Foster children’s emotional needs are not different from the needs of other typically developing children.” While the responses were distributed across all possible response categories for this question, the majority of participants, 64%, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. See Table 5.

Table 5

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	4	11%
<i>Agree</i>	3	8%
<i>Neutral</i>	6	17%
<i>Disagree</i>	14	39%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	9	25%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

Question six stated “Foster children are capable of forming positive attachments/relationships with their teachers.” For this question, the vast majority of participants, 89%, strongly agreed or agreed with this statement. No participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. See Table 6.

Table 6

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	24	67%
<i>Agree</i>	8	22%
<i>Neutral</i>	4	11%
<i>Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

“Children who have lived in foster care perform as well academically in reading and writing as other typically developing students who have not lived in foster care” was the statement for question seven. The majority of participants, 50%, had a neutral response to this statement with almost equal amounts of participants agreeing, 28%, and disagreeing, 22%, to the statement. See Table 7.



Table 7

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	0	0%
<i>Agree</i>	10	28%
<i>Neutral</i>	18	50%
<i>Disagree</i>	8	22%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	0	0%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

The participants responded to the following statement for question eight: “If foster children perform at a low level, their lower academic achievement should be tolerated more than the typically developing children’s should in the classroom.” The majority of participants, 45%, disagreed with this statement. See Table 8.

Table 8

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	3	8%
<i>Agree</i>	0	0%
<i>Neutral</i>	12	33%
<i>Disagree</i>	16	45%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	5	14%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

Question nine stated “Foster children’s academic needs are not different from the needs of other typically developing children.” The responses to this question are evenly distributed with equal number of participants agreeing, 31%, as well as disagreeing, 31%, with this statement. See Table 9.

Table 9

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	5	14%
<i>Agree</i>	11	31%
<i>Neutral</i>	7	19%
<i>Disagree</i>	11	31%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	2	5%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

The final question of the survey provided to participants was as follows: “When making instructional decisions, teachers must take into account the presence of foster children in the classroom.” The responses are widely distributed for this question. However, the majority of participants agree, 39%, or are neutral, 34%, in response to this statement. See Table 10.

Table 10

	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
<i>Strongly Agree</i>	3	8%
<i>Agree</i>	14	39%
<i>Neutral</i>	12	34%
<i>Disagree</i>	5	14%
<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	2	5%
<i>Total</i>	36	100%

## Discussion

A majority of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that foster children are capable of forming positive attachments/relationships with both their peers and with teachers. While this may be true for some foster children, the existing body of research does not support this conclusion. Foster children are typically highly-mobile, which makes forming meaningful relationships more difficult. The trauma the foster child experiences can also affect their ability to trust or to reach out and connect to another human being. Teachers should be aware of this challenge and do what they can to cultivate appropriate relationships between students and also between adults and the foster child. It would be beneficial if adults in the school would consciously look for students who seem disconnected and try to intervene in gentle and unobtrusive ways.

Teachers in this study also perceive a neutral stance when questioned about a foster child's behavior. Many of the teachers simply may not know they have, or have had, foster children in their classroom to be able to distinguish if they noticed more frequent misbehavior. Schools need to work closely with the local child services division to be sure they know when they have a student who may be facing trauma of a disruptive home environment or foster care placement. They can respect the child's privacy by not singling them out, but knowledge of their life is integral to helping them receive the services that can help guide them through their journey of placement. If schools, teachers, or principals do not know a child's situation, they cannot provide help and support.

Teachers in the study also believed that foster children feel included in the classroom, which is often not the case. The existing body of research shows that students in foster care do not perform as well academically. More education, overall, for pre-service and in-service teachers is needed to help them understand the unique challenges foster children face.

The participants disagreed that a foster child's lower academic achievement should be tolerated more than the typically developing child. Unless teachers realize that they must hold foster children to high-expectations, this population will continue to struggle to succeed academically.

The teachers did not realize the impact of making instructional decisions with foster children in mind. When teachers do not plan with this specific population in mind, they can make decisions that ultimately make the child experience trauma all over again. It may be asking the class to bring in a baby picture, something the child in foster care may not be able to do. It may be choosing a book to read aloud that involves something that triggers memories of their trauma. No teacher can avoid this all of the time, but with aforethought, some embarrassment or difficult emotions in front of their peers may be avoided. Also, the teacher may still choose a particular book or activity, but could plan to use it purposefully to help the child work through something in a supportive and safe environment.

With the numbers of children in foster care growing exponentially in the United States, teachers must begin to gain education about this special population. They need empathy for the foster child. Not just sympathy, but empathy. Foster children need teachers who will invest everything they can in these students knowing they may never see the fruits of their effort. The students need to see teachers who model appropriate displays of emotion, teachers who will

guide students through learning how to cope with a difficult life situation. In short, foster children need unconditional love at the one place that will be the most constant environment in their life for a time – school.

### **Implications**

Although many students across America are experiencing academic failure, the growing population of foster children is more likely to experience this failure (California Education Collaborative for Children in Foster Care 2008). Foster children experience academic failure because of the traumatizing experience of abuse or neglect. The effects of abuse cause significant negative effects to the developing brain (Jensen 1998). Teachers have an enormous responsibility to all of their students, but teachers are especially important to foster children because of the consistency and stability that school has the opportunity to provide (Noble 1997). Teachers must understand that abuse and placement into foster care places those children at risk academically (Zetlin, Weinberg, & Kimm 2003). According to Palladino (2006), teachers are unaware of the presence of foster children in their classrooms, and thus their needs as learners. Noble (1997) also concluded that teachers need to recognize the difference in academic ability and understand the reasons for misbehavior.

Teacher perception plays an important role in students' success (Vail 2005). The idea of the Pygmalion effect, or self-fulfilling prophecy, has been shown to change teacher behavior and academic outcomes for certain groups of students (Ennis 1998). If teachers have inaccurate attitudes about foster children's ability and behavior, these perceptions could be one more roadblock the children face academically. The outcomes of this research added to existing literature about teachers' knowledge of foster children's academic and behavioral needs by exploring a specific group of current teachers to capture their perceptions about foster children's academic ability and behavior in school.

### **Conclusions**

Fulfilling the purpose of this study has brought a heightened awareness of the teachers' perceptions towards this growing population of students relative to the challenges facing foster children. This amplified awareness can influence professional development offerings to ensure teachers are supplied access to information to help them become more capable of providing more accurately guided treatments, strategies and interventions so that these children can have improved attachment capabilities, and thus break the foster care cycle. Examining the perceptions of teachers can also inform higher education institutions of what content needs to be added to teacher education preparatory programs.

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