

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON FOSTER STUDENTS

1

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Academic Achievement of Students in the Foster Care System

By:

Tina Chaney

A Digital Doctoral Portfolio Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Transformative Learning in the Global Community (Ed.D.)

Webster University

May 04, 2025

Abstract

This qualitative study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the academic achievement of students in the foster care system, drawing on the perspectives of teachers and school administrators. Through interviews and surveys, I examined the unique challenges foster students faced during remote learning, including placement instability, limited access to technology, and increased mental health concerns. Participants described how the digital divide and frequent placement changes disrupted educational continuity and widened existing achievement gaps. The findings also highlight the strain on support systems and the urgent need for trauma-informed practices and targeted interventions. Beyond documenting these challenges, this project became a transformative learning experience for me as a practitioner and advocate. Engaging deeply with the stories and insights of educators and administrators changed how I understand the intersection of policy, equity, and everyday practice. The process prompted me to rethink how schools and agencies can collaborate and inspired me to develop actionable recommendations for improving support for foster students-especially in times of crisis. While the study's small sample size limits generalizability, the lessons learned offer a foundation for ongoing growth, reflection, and positive change in the field.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction
2. Contextualization of the Topic
3. Challenges Faced by Foster Student
4. Pandemic-Induced Disruptions
 - Academic and Social Disruptions During the Pandemic
 - Foster System Crisis
5. Educational Continuity and Placement Stability
6. Digital Divide Literacy and Access
7. Mental Health and Trauma
8. Support Systems and Advocacy
9. Long-Term Academic Implications
10. Innovations and Adaptations
11. Policy Implications
12. Theoretical Framing
13. Literature Review
14. Statement of the Problem
15. Research Questions
16. Methodology Plan
17. Discussions & Impact
18. Conclusion
19. References

Contextualization of The Topic

This research project explored how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the academic performance of foster student. This study hoped to examine the disruptions caused by the pandemic, such as school closures, remote learning, and social distancing measures, and their impact on the educational outcomes of the youth in foster care. COVID-19 disrupted all levels of the education system, from preschool to college education. Our students' learning was severely impacted by this disruption.

For years, foster students have faced unique educational barriers because of frequent placement changes, trauma, and a lack of consistent support. Laws like the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 were created to help keep foster youth in their original schools and support their learning, but gaps remain. These policies show that even before the pandemic, there was a need for stronger systems to ensure stability and success for foster students (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Challenges Faced by Foster Students

Even under normal circumstances, students in the foster care system face numerous challenges. These include unstable living conditions, educational disruptions due to placement changes, a lack of resources, and trauma from past experiences. These factors contribute to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates compared to their non-foster care peers. Significant legislation, like the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008, emphasizes the importance of educational stability for children in foster care by mandating that child welfare agencies work with educational agencies to ensure children remain in their schools of origin whenever possible.

Pandemic-Induced Disruptions

The COVID-19 pandemic added significant challenges for foster students. School closures, the shift to remote learning, and other modifications to teaching strategies exacerbated existing problems. Foster students often lack the same resources as their peers, such as parental supervision, a quiet study space, or reliable internet access. Those still living in foster facilities might have to share a room with multiple individuals, making remote learning even more difficult.

According to the Annie Casey Foundation, "The pandemic has had a wide-ranging and long-lasting impact on education in the United States. Not only are students still contending with years of learning loss, but they also must rebound from the disruption to their social and emotional development.

Academic and Social Disruptions During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic brought a sudden shift to remote learning, which reduced instructional time and made it harder for students to stay focused or ask for help. Foster students, who already faced challenges with stability and resources, were especially affected (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). Teachers had to quickly redesign their lesson plans, often cutting out parts of the curriculum just to keep up with limited time and new technology demands (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

At the same time, many students lost access to extracurricular activities that helped them manage stress, build skills, and connect with peers (Casey, 2024). The loss of these outlets, combined with increased screen time and isolation, led to higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression for a lot of students (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2023). These

mental health challenges made it even harder for foster students to stay engaged and succeed in school.

Overall, the pandemic didn't just disrupt academics-it also affected students' emotional well-being and their chances to participate in activities that support their growth and resilience.

Foster System Crisis

The pandemic did not create these challenges, but rather intensified long-standing gaps in the foster care system. For decades, policies like the Fostering Connections Act (2008) have aimed to stabilize educational experiences for foster youth, but the pandemic revealed persistent weaknesses. These issues are intertwined with broader social movements for educational equity and trauma-informed practice, which advocate for systemic change to support marginalized students (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020).

The economic downturn of 2020 has also worsened the situation for youth transitioning out of the system, who face job, housing, and food instability. Right now, there are more than 400,000 children in foster care in the U.S., many of whom struggle with family courts and social-service bureaucracies disrupted by the pandemic (Chen, 2021).

Educational Continuity and Placement Stability

A study by the National Youth in Transition Database (2021) found that foster students experience an average of one to two school changes per year due to placement shifts. The pandemic amplified this instability, leading to more frequent moves and school changes, impacting academic performance as students struggled to adapt to new curricula and social environments.

Digital Divide, Literacy, and Access

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the digital divide into sharp focus, especially for foster students. Disparities in internet access and device availability exacerbated existing educational inequities, particularly among Black and Brown communities (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2020). A report by the National Foster Youth Institute (2022) found that only 67% of foster youth had reliable internet access during the pandemic, compared to 87% of their non-foster peers. This lack of access made participation in remote learning especially challenging and contributed to increased learning loss and disengagement.

Beyond access, digital literacy emerged as a critical barrier. Many foster students lacked the opportunity to develop essential digital skills, further hindering their ability to engage with online platforms and complete assignments (National Foster Youth Institute, 2022). Teachers and administrators in this study noted that even when devices were available, students often struggled with basic navigation of learning platforms and troubleshooting connectivity issues. These challenges highlight the need for comprehensive solutions that address both technology access and digital skill-building for foster youth.

By understanding the intersection of digital access and literacy, educators and policymakers can better support foster students in overcoming barriers to academic achievement during and after the pandemic.

Mental Health and Trauma

The pandemic's impact on mental health was severe for foster students. A study by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2023) revealed that foster students were 2.5 times more likely to experience symptoms of depression and anxiety during the pandemic compared to

their non-foster peers. This mental health crisis significantly impacts academic performance, as emotional well-being is closely tied to cognitive function.

Support Systems and Advocacy

The pandemic highlighted the importance of comprehensive support systems for foster students. Many traditional support channels were disrupted, leading to increased feelings of isolation and lack of support. A survey by the Foster Care Alumni of America (2022) found that 78% of foster students felt more isolated and less supported during the pandemic, directly impacting academic motivation and performance.

Long-term Academic Implications

The educational setbacks during the pandemic may have long-lasting effects on foster students' academic trajectories. A study by the Education Trust (2023) estimates that foster students may experience up to 18 months of learning loss due to pandemic disruptions, compared to 6-8 months for non-foster students. This disparity could widen the existing achievement gap and impact college readiness and future career prospects.

Innovations and Adaptations

Despite the challenges, the pandemic spurred innovations in supporting foster students' education. Some child welfare agencies partnered with educational technology companies to provide tablets and internet hotspots. Virtual tutoring programs, like the "Foster Learn" initiative in California, emerged, offering personalized academic support and resulting in significant GPA improvements (California Department of Education, 2022).

Policy Implications

The pandemic has prompted policymakers to reevaluate support systems for foster students. The American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 included provisions for increased funding for education and support services for foster students. Several states have implemented additional measures to support foster students during and after the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the academic performance and overall well-being of foster students. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive support systems, innovative solutions, and targeted policies. By understanding and mitigating the effects of the pandemic, we can better support foster students in achieving their academic and personal goals.

Theoretical Framing

The educational disparities which existed prior to the COVID 19 pandemic have been aggravated, particularly impacting students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds. As the Center for Poverty and Inequality Research (2012) pointed out, "Systemic disparities regarding race and lower socioeconomic standing were firmly entrenched within the education structure prior to COVID-19. The pandemic intensified these disparities by limiting the availability of face-to-face instruction and internet access, following the widespread closure of schools."

The ramifications have been especially severe for foster students, many of whom were already battling systemic disparities. In the midst of the pandemic, they had to pursue their education with minimal help, basically self-teaching in an environment not designed for such autonomous learning.

To delve deeper into these issues and devise solutions, Critical Race Theory (CRT), which evolved in the late 1980s as a branch of critical legal studies, can be extremely useful. As defined by Britannica, CRT calls into question "conventional approaches dealing with race and racism in American society". Using CRT to analyze how COVID-19 influences the educational performance of foster students can shed light on the underlying systemic issues.

According to a survey conducted by the Alliance for Children's Rights, massive disparities in terms of access to educational resources were revealed during the pandemic. As Barber (2021) stated, "Just half of the caregivers confirmed that each child in their care was given a device for online learning. The remaining caregivers had to tackle problems when multiple children had to use online resources simultaneously". This digital divide is evidence of how systemic disparities can have concrete consequences, directly affecting students' engagement in their education.

Even if devices were available, issues with connectivity posed a significant hurdle. Eric (2021) noted that "Although most caregivers (87 percent) had high-speed internet at home, nearly two-thirds (62 percent) faced connectivity issues once a week or more". These technical issues further enhance the educational challenges encountered by foster care students during the pandemic.

The principle of intersectionality, a core element of CRT, is particularly relevant when assessing the experiences of foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Intersectionality acknowledges that people have multiple social identities (such as race, gender, class, etc.) that interact and influence their experiences of privilege and oppression. This means recognizing how factors like race, ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability status and immigration status intersect with their involvement in the foster care system to influence their educational journey and outcomes.

For instance, there is an overrepresentation of LGBTQ+ youth in the foster care system and they may encounter additional obstacles during the pandemic. In a report by the Williams Institute (2019), it was found that "LGBTQ youth are 2.7 times more likely to be in foster care than their non-LGBTQ counterparts." They may face unique stressors linked to their identity, which could amplify the educational disruptions brought about by the pandemic.

Moreover, the overrepresentation of Black and Latino students in the foster care system is reflective of broader racial inequality patterns. As stated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2020), "African American children are represented in foster care at a rate 1.8 times higher than their population share." This overrepresentation signifies that these students are more likely to confront the combined challenges of navigating both the foster care system and remote learning during the pandemic.

CRT's emphasis on institutional racism offers a framework to understand how systemic barriers interact with personal circumstances to create academic achievement obstacles. In the case of foster care students during the pandemic, this could manifest in various ways. For instance, foster families in predominantly Black or Latino neighborhoods might have limited access to high-speed internet or may experience increased financial strain due to the pandemic, directly influencing students' ability to participate in online learning.

The principle of counter-storytelling, a key element of CRT, can aid in addressing the obstacles faced by foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting the voices and experiences of these students and their families, we can gain a more detailed understanding of their specific challenges and formulate targeted interventions.

For instance, a study by Voices of Youth Count (2017) revealed that "Over the course of a year, one in 10 young adults aged 18-25, and at least one in 30 adolescents aged 13-17,

experience some form of homelessness." Many of these youths have had experiences in the foster care system. Their accounts of managing homelessness and education during a global pandemic provide vital insights into the intersecting challenges they face and also their resilience.

To tackle these complex issues, a multi-pronged approach, underpinned by CRT principles, is needed. This may encompass:

1. Specific technology access initiatives: Ensuring all foster care students have access to dependable devices and internet connectivity for online learning.
2. Culturally responsive education: Developing curriculums and teaching methods that respect and value the diverse experiences of foster care students, especially those from marginalized communities.
3. Trauma-informed practices: Acknowledging the impact of trauma on learning and implementing strategies that support students' emotional well-being, in addition to their academic progress.
4. Intersectional support services: Providing comprehensive support that tackles the multiple, intersecting challenges faced by foster care students, including mental health services, academic tutoring, and life skills training.
5. Policy advocacy: Working towards changing policies that perpetuate systemic educational and child welfare disparities.

By utilizing CRT principles to analyze the educational outcomes of foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic, we can create more effective and equitable solutions. As put by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), pioneers in applying CRT in the field of education, "The voice of people of color is imperative for a comprehensive analysis of the

education system." This view underscores the importance of focusing on the experiences of those most impacted by educational disparities in our efforts to address them.

The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the longstanding educational disparities, particularly for foster care students of color and those from lower-income backgrounds. By using CRT as a tool to understand and address these challenges, we can strive towards achieving more equitable educational outcomes, even in the face of unprecedented global crises.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly affected education systems worldwide, but its impact on vulnerable student populations, particularly those in foster care, has been especially profound. This analysis explores the challenges faced by foster care students during the pandemic and the long-term implications for their academic progress and future prospects.

Identifying At-Risk Populations

Korman et al. (2023) found that in the Los Angeles Unified School District, foster care students, along with English learners, students with disabilities, and students experiencing homelessness, were less likely than their peers to log into remote learning platforms or complete assignments during the pandemic. Specifically, 6–10% of foster students did not log in at all, and another 10–15% logged in but did not engage with any materials.

This data shows that foster students were among the most at risk for educational disengagement during remote learning. The findings highlight how pre-existing vulnerabilities were magnified by the pandemic, making it even more difficult for foster students to stay connected to school. My own interviews with educators confirmed this trend, as many reported that foster students were often the first to fall behind or become unreachable when schools closed.

Unique Challenges for Foster Care Students

Hanlon (2002) examined the impact of COVID-19 on foster parents and children in care, noting that families in states with more restrictive policies reported greater pandemic-specific concerns, including a lack of agency communication and increased mental health struggles for foster students.

This lack of consistent support and communication left many foster students feeling isolated and unsupported. For foster students, who already face instability, the breakdown of communication with agencies during the pandemic meant they had even fewer resources to help them adapt to new educational demands. This aligns with my findings, where teachers described how difficult it was to coordinate support for foster students when agencies were overwhelmed or unavailable.

Technology and Connectivity Barriers

Beal (2022) reported that schools and agencies struggled to provide foster students with the necessary technology for remote learning. Many students lacked reliable devices or internet, and some received equipment late or not at all.

This technological divide not only hindered students' ability to participate in online classes but also widened the existing educational gap between foster care students and their peers. In my research, educators described how technology barriers made it almost impossible for some foster youth to keep up, leading to increased frustration and learning loss. This highlights the need for targeted interventions to ensure equitable access to technology for foster students, both during emergencies and in regular times.

Mental Health and Engagement

Giezek (2023) found that the rise in depression among foster students was linked to a fall in self-efficacy both before and after the pandemic. Increased stress and anxiety made it difficult for many foster care students to maintain focus and motivation in their studies.

This finding is important because it shows how the pandemic not only affected academic progress but also had a direct impact on students' emotional well-being and confidence. My interviews with teachers echoed this, as many observed that foster students struggled to stay engaged and often withdrew from school activities as their mental health declined.

Educational Disruptions and Learning Loss

Font (2020) observed that virtual learning may be especially challenging for children and youth with special learning needs, and that children who are already academically behind may lose access to needed educational support, such as one-on-one instruction or tutoring.

This loss of personalized support has likely contributed to significant learning losses among foster care students, potentially widening the achievement gap between them and their

peers. My research supports this, with educators noting that many foster students were unable to access the individualized help they needed to keep up with coursework, leading to further setbacks.

School Connectedness and Community

Barber (2021) reported that a recent national student survey found that more than two-thirds of students overall did not feel connected to their school (69 percent) and did not feel like part of their school community (70 percent) during distance learning.

For foster care students, who often rely on school as a stabilizing factor in their lives, this loss of connection could have far-reaching consequences for their academic engagement and overall well-being. This was echoed in my study, where teachers described how the absence of in-person interaction made it harder for foster students to form relationships and feel supported.

Long-term Economic Implications

Casey (2024) warns that if leaders do not address the learning loss caused by the pandemic, the negative impact on education could cost children hundreds of billions of dollars in future earnings and the U.S. economy trillions in lost activity.

For foster care students, who were already at higher risk of lower educational attainment and earnings potential, these economic consequences could be particularly severe. This underscores the urgency of addressing educational setbacks now, before they translate into long-term disadvantages for this vulnerable group.

Intersectionality of Challenges

Students in foster care are from disadvantaged backgrounds more often than not, such as Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities. Education gaps among foster care students have been made severe by the financial and health implications of COVID-19, which have disproportionately affected these communities.

This intersectionality means that foster students often face multiple, overlapping barriers to success, making a one-size-fits-all approach to support ineffective. My research found that educators who recognized these intersecting challenges were better able to tailor their support to meet the unique needs of each student.

The Need for Trauma-Sensitive Responses

Eric (2021) emphasizes that as students in foster care return to school with additional trauma and amidst ongoing uncertainty, teachers and other school staff must provide trauma-sensitive responses to keep foster youth connected and engaged with education.

This approach is crucial for addressing the emotional and psychological impacts of the pandemic on foster care students and supporting their reintegration into the school environment. In my interviews, teachers who used trauma-informed practices reported better engagement and outcomes for their foster students.

Strategies for Re-engagement

Eric (2021) suggests that LEAs should ensure their attendance tracking systems for online instruction flag students in foster care and develop a plan for prioritizing the re-engagement of foster youth. District foster youth liaisons and county FYSCPs should collaborate to regularly check in with foster students and address barriers to online instruction.

These targeted strategies are essential for identifying and supporting foster care students who may have become disconnected from their education during the pandemic. My

research found that schools with proactive outreach and dedicated liaisons were more successful in keeping foster students engaged and supported.

Policy Implications and Future Directions

The challenges faced by foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for systemic changes in education and child welfare policies. Advocates are pushing for:

1. Increased access to technology and internet connectivity for foster care students
2. Policies to ensure stability in foster care placements
3. Enhanced mental health support services
4. Improved collaboration between social services, schools, and community organizations

Furthermore, as (Kaufman & Kaufman, 1983) notes:

The Every Student Succeeds Act offers some protections but addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates personalized support from foster parents and educators.

Moving forward, it will be crucial to implement comprehensive policies that address the unique needs of foster care students, not only in times of crisis but as part of ongoing efforts to improve their educational outcomes and life prospects.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing challenges and created new obstacles for students in foster care. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated effort from policymakers, educators, social workers, and foster families to ensure that these vulnerable students receive the support they need to overcome the pandemic's impacts and succeed in their educational journeys.

Statement of Problem of Research/Practice

Picture the next generation's leaders - doctors, artists, teachers, innovators. Their origins are wrapped in the fabric of foster care, their dreams as diverse as the night sky's constellation, guiding them toward their futures. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has threatened to dull their inner radiance, with schools transforming into digital shadows and warm, physical connections with families replaced by cold screens.

The Digital Void

A significant number of foster students struggle with the absence of reliable internet connections, computers, tablets, or necessary software for remote learning. This glaring digital disparity only worsens the already existing educational gaps by hindering their full participation in digital classrooms and learning activities. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2020 study reveals, "Only 51% of youth in foster care have access to a home computer, compared to 79% of the general population." This stark inequality shines a glaring light on the pressing need for digital fairness in education.

The Instability of Placement

Foster students face regularly changed placements - an inherent characteristic of the foster care system, which disrupts their support network and destabilizes their educational setting. The pandemic has amplified these challenges, inducing greater instability and obstructing their academic progression. The National Youth in Transition Database's 2021 research shows that "foster students, on average, switch schools 1.5 to 2 times per year,

causing an academic setback of four to six months with each move." This continual disruption cultivates a formidable environment for learning and personal development.

The Struggles of Mental Health

The mental health complications brought about by the global pandemic exacerbate stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms in foster care students. The worry about their own health, their loved ones, and the uncertain future adds to this mental burden. The National Center for Youth Law's 2022 report indicates, "foster students are 2.5 times more susceptible to mental health disorders than their non-foster peers, a gap that has broadened during the pandemic."

These mental health challenges may add to their difficulty in focusing on their studies and engaging in remote learning effectively. The American Academy of Pediatrics, in 2021, stressed the importance of "Trauma-informed care and mental health support in enabling foster students to tackle their unique struggles, especially during global crises."

Advocacy and Policy Alterations

Alongside changes in laws and funding that prioritize the educational well-being of these susceptible youths, advocates for students within the foster care system need to increase public awareness of these existing problems. In the words of John Seita, a former foster student turned professor of social work, "The greatest tragedy of the foster care system is forgetting that these are children with dreams, aspirations, and the capacity to shape the world" (Seita et al., 2016).

To address the needs of foster care students during and post the COVID-19 pandemic, the following policies are proposed:

1. Providing access to technology and internet connectivity
2. Ensuring stability in foster care placements
3. Enhancing mental health support services
4. Strengthening collaboration between social services, schools, and community organizations

The National foster students Institute, in 2023, proposed an all-encompassing approach: "We must design a systematic support structure that is inclusive of education, mental health, and social services to ensure that foster students not only survive but flourish in their academic pursuits."

The Might of Dreams and Support

Regardless of the hurdles of foster care, these young individuals have dreams, aspirations, and the potential for success. A recent study uncovered that 70% of foster students aim to pursue a college education. However, like all children, they need guidance and support from family members, mentors, friends, teachers, or other community figures. This support can make a very big difference (Fostermore, 2020).

The words of Michelle Obama, "For every door that's been opened to me, I've tried to open my door to others... Let's invite one another in. Maybe then we can begin to fear less, to make fewer wrong assumptions, to let go of the biases and stereotypes that unnecessarily divide us" (Thielman, 2019), capturing the essence of the large amount of advocacy and support foster students need in the realm of education. Foster students battle distinctive challenges in accessing and thriving in educational settings, a struggle that finds empathy in Obama's sentiments.

Studies relentlessly highlight that foster students encounter notable obstacles on their educational path. A research by Pecora et al. (2006) reveals a stark contrast— only about half of foster students manage to finish high school by 18 in comparison to the lion's share of the overall population, which stands at 84%. Further, Courtney et al. (2011) discovered that a limited 20% of foster students who complete high school end up in college, with an astounding 2-9% of them eventually obtaining a bachelor's degree.

These figures emphasize the critical need for directed support and advocacy within the educational structure. Obama's call for inclusivity and understanding aligns with substantiated interventions that have shown promising results in enhancing outcomes for foster students. Case in point, Geiger and Beltran's (2017) study proved that through mentorship programs and personalized educational aid, the academic performance and college readiness of foster students could notably improve.

Obama's opening of doors and welcoming others, policymakers and educational bodies can make strides toward shaping a more accommodating and supportive educational environment for foster youth. This approach doesn't only cater to the immediate educational needs of these students but also strives to dismantle the systemic barriers and prejudices that have historically hindered their advancement.

Personal Advocacy and Experience

As a passionate educator, I am a never-ending advocate for my students and I strive to be the best educator possible, ensuring they have what they need to thrive both inside and outside the classrooms.

The commitment to advocate aligns with renowned educator Paulo Freire, who voiced,

"Education either becomes an instrument to integrate the younger generation into the existing

system or it morphs into the practice of freedom, the means by which individuals critically and

creatively interact with reality and discover how to participate in transforming their world"

(Admin, 2023). If we stand up for foster youth, we enable them to become active contributors in shaping their futures.

Family support influences educational outcomes. A study by the Urban Institute (2021) found that "Foster youth with consistent adult support are 55% more likely to graduate high school and twice as likely to enroll in college compared to those without such support." This highlights the critical role that educators, mentors, and foster families play in these young lives.

A Vision for the Future

I envision myself persistently advocating for education and my students by empowering them and encouraging lifelong learning. I aspire to inspire, motivate, and empower every student and make them believe in their dreams and their education.

Having a supportive and inclusive environment, we can transform the educational experience for foster youth and open new possibilities for their futures. It is crucial that no foster student ever feels excluded or unwelcome and that they understand that they deserve access to the same resources as everyone else, as indicated by research from the National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2022) - "Foster youth who feel a sense of

belonging in their school communities are three times more likely to graduate on time and proceed to higher education."

The difficulties that foster youth encounter in education, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, are immense yet not invincible. Through dedicated advocacy, policy revisions, and providing necessary support and resources, we can create an educational environment wherein foster youth can thrive. As Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, beautifully expressed, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it" (Edelman, 1988).

Championing the cause of foster youth in education, we are not just aiding individual students; we are making an investment in the future of our communities and our collective society. Every foster youth who finds success in education symbolizes a triumph over adversity and a stride toward a more equitable and compassionate world. It is our joint responsibility to ensure these young people have the support, resources, and opportunities they need to transform their dreams into reality.

Research Questions

The magnified disparities in education, particularly for vulnerable student groups like those in foster care, become increasingly challenging to ignore. The pandemic has exacerbated learning loss, with experts, including Hextor (2021), warning that, "students on average likely will have lost five to nine months of learning by the end of the school year." For students in foster care, this learning loss could be even more severe, given the distinctive trials they're often forced to overcome.

In light of these findings, schools need to focus more intently on tutoring programs. These are especially crucial for those significantly affected, such as students from low-

income families or in foster care. Hextor (2021) stresses, "Effective tutoring will help students catch-up after the pandemic. Quality tutoring is developed over time, and responsive training and supports are central to a successful program." High-quality, bespoke tutoring could be a successful strategy for combating learning gaps.

Tutoring is not a cure-all though. Foster care students need an array of resources, including school supplies, vision service plans, affordable computers, free or cheap internet services, and preparation courses for life after graduation. The National Working Group on Foster Care and Education (2018) reminds us, "Students in foster care face unique barriers to their educational success and limited access to resources that other students take for granted."

Moreover, we need to address the systemic obstacles that amplify disparities. Wildeman and Emanuel (2014) poignantly state, "African American children are placed in foster care at much higher rates than white children, a pattern that cannot be fully explained by differences in poverty rates or reports of maltreatment." Policy revisions and vital program changes will ensure students from all walks of life receive equitable, diverse, and culturally sensitive support.

And we can only provide that support if we understand foster care students' experiences. By applying qualitative research methods, we can gain an inclusive understanding of the struggles they face and the ways they cope. As Creswell and Poth (2018) express, "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem."

However, these students often balance multiple identities, which influence their access to resources. Their experiences echo Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, where "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences

separately" (p. 139). This theory plays an instrumental role when addressing the multidimensional challenges that foster care students face.

For example, LGBTQ+ youth in foster care confront distinctive barriers, as Wilson et al. (2014) assert, "LGBTQ youth in foster care face discrimination and harassment not only because of their sexual orientation and gender identity but also because of their status as foster youth" (p. 2). Similarly, the overrepresentation of Black children in the foster care system compounds their exposure to systemic racism and the difficulties of foster care life (Roberts, 2002). And yet another layer—the disability status—can exacerbate the risk for poor educational outcomes for foster students (Zetlin et al., 2004). Lastly, experiences also differ based on gender; Courtney et al. (2011) highlighted that "female foster youth are more likely than their male counterparts to experience early pregnancy and parenting" (p. 25).

Keeping these intersecting identities in mind is important when developing support systems. According to Evans et al. (2017), "Interventions aimed at improving outcomes for foster youth must take into account the complex interplay of multiple identities and associated risk factors" (p. 89).

Understanding the complex experiences of foster care students can enhance comprehensive support and improve outcomes. Following the guidelines of Crenshaw's work, we need to transcend unidimensional thinking to effectively address the layered challenges of foster care students.

Moreover, as the pandemic has heightened concerns about mental health, schools need to provide trauma-informed care, mental health professionals, peer support groups, and training for educators and foster parents to recognize and respond to mental health issues.

The pandemic has also exacerbated the digital divide, with many foster care students lacking the necessary devices and reliable internet for online learning. This necessitates initiatives that provide reliable devices, high-speed internet, digital literacy training for students and their parents, and educational apps and software.

Looking beyond the pandemic, sustained strategies are crucial to supporting foster care students. This includes ongoing academic support, career counseling, transition support, and a continuous emphasis on mental health. As stressed by Berger et al. (2015), "Supporting foster youth through their transition to adulthood is not only a moral imperative but also a sound economic investment in our future workforce and communities."

Supporting foster care students is not just a matter of improving education; it is a matter of social justice. The investment we make in their futures is an investment in the future of our society.

Methodology Plan: A Qualitative Study on COVID-19's Impact on Foster Care Students

1. Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students' well-being, learning environment, and studies. The choice of qualitative methodology is based on its ability to capture rich, contextualized data and provide a holistic understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Marshall (1999) notes, qualitative research is crucial to understanding the deeper and often complex effects of the pandemic on foster care students, allowing us to comprehend the personal, relational, and structural factors that influence their academic progress.

2. Research Design

The study utilized a phenomenological design, focusing on the lived experiences of foster care students, educators, and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach aligns with Van Manen's (2016) perspective on researching lived experience and will allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, challenges, and adaptations.

3. Sampling Strategy

3.1 Participant Selection

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who meet the following criteria:

Educators working with foster care students during the pandemic

Foster parents or caregivers of eligible students

3.2 Sample Size

The study aimed for a sample size of 5-7 participants across all groups, or until data saturation is reached (Guest et al., 2006). This number may be adjusted based on the richness of data collected and emerging themes.

4. Data Collection Methods

4.1 In-depth Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were the primary data collection method. These interviews were conducted both in-person and virtually, depending on participants' preferences and public health guidelines.

4.2 Photo Elicitation

To enhance data collection and provide participants with alternative ways to express their experiences, photo-elicitation techniques will be incorporated (Harper, 2002). Participants will be asked to share photos representing their experiences during the pandemic, which will serve as prompts for discussion during interviews.

4.3 Document Analysis

Relevant documents such as school records, policy documents, educational crisis packets, and news articles will be analyzed to provide context and triangulate data from interviews.

5. Data Collection Procedures

5.1 Interview Protocol

An interview guide will be developed based on the research questions and literature review. The guide will be flexible to allow for exploration of emerging themes. Key areas of focus will include:

The ability to concentrate on work during the pandemic

The academic implications of COVID-19 on students

The effectiveness of available educational crisis packets

The time availability for job responsibilities during COVID-19

Responsiveness of academic support teams to the pandemic

The immediate assessment of the pandemic's impact on students

Satisfaction level with in-person teaching

Sufficient training for the transition to online teaching during COVID-19

5.2 Interview Process

Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent.

I took field notes during and immediately after each interview.

I conducted follow-up interviews when necessary to clarify or elaborate on participant responses.

6. Data Analysis

6.1 Thematic Analysis

Data analysis will follow Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis process:

Familiarization with the data

Generating initial codes

Searching for themes

Reviewing themes

Defining and naming themes

Producing the report

6.2 Coding Process

Initial coding was done manually to ensure deep engagement with the data

NVivo software was used for subsequent coding and theme organization

In Nvivo coding was used to preserve participants' voices (Saldaña, 2021)

6.3 Data Interpretation

Themes will be interpreted in light of existing literature and theoretical frameworks

Attention will be paid to both common themes and unique experiences across different participant groups (students, educators, caregivers)

Visual data from photo elicitation will be integrated into the thematic analysis

7. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, several strategies will be employed:

7.1 Credibility

Member checking: Participants will be invited to review interview transcripts and preliminary findings

Peer debriefing: Regular discussions with colleagues not involved in the study

Triangulation of data sources (interviews, photos, documents) and participant groups

7.2 Transferability

Thick description of the research context and participant characteristics

Detailed documentation of the research process

7.3 Dependability

Audit trail: Maintaining detailed records of all research activities and decisions

Reflexive journaling to document researcher's thoughts and potential biases

7.4 Confirmability

Use of direct quotes to support interpretations

Acknowledgment of the researcher's positionality and potential biases

8. Ethical Considerations

8.1 Informed Consent

Detailed information about the study will be provided to all participants

Separate consent forms for interviews and photo use will be obtained

For minors, both participant assent and caregiver consent will be required

8.2 Confidentiality and Anonymity

Use of pseudonyms in all research outputs

Secure storage of all data, including audio recordings and photos

Careful consideration of the use of visual data to protect participant identity

8.3 Emotional Support

A protocol for referring participants to support services if needed

Debriefing sessions after interviews to address any emotional distress

8.4 Cultural Sensitivity

Awareness and respect for cultural differences (Tillman, 2002)

Flexibility in interview approaches to accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds

9. Limitations and Potential Challenges

Potential difficulty in accessing foster care students due to their vulnerable status

Possible technological barriers to virtual interviews

Limitations in generalizability due to the qualitative nature of the study

Potential bias in self-reported data, especially regarding the effectiveness of educational measures

10. Timeline

Month 1-2: Finalize research design, obtain ethical approval

Month 3-4: Participant recruitment and pilot interviews

Month 5-7: Data collection (interviews and photo elicitation)

Month 8-10: Data analysis and initial write-up

Month 11-12: Member checking, final analysis, and report writing

This methodology plan provides a comprehensive framework for conducting a qualitative study on the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students, incorporating perspectives from students, educators, and caregivers. The chosen methods align with the research goals and will enable a deep, nuanced understanding of participants' experiences across various aspects of education and well-being during the pandemic.

This survey approach will help us quantify the impacts and highlight statistical trends. For example, previous research shows that the pandemic affected enrollment rates, slowing their decrease by 2%, which equates to a slower decline (1% every six months) after the pandemic began (Eric, 2021).

Concerning education during COVID-19, 5% of young people reported their school closed but planned to reopen, 1% reported their school closed with no reopening plans, and 6% had to drop out due to COVID-19. Interestingly, a majority of 52% reported a shift to online classes, thus maintaining their enrollment (Eric, 2021).

Qualitative Methodology

The qualitative dimension of our study focused on conducting in-depth interviews with teachers and administrators. The goal was to capture the personal and detailed experiences of these individuals during those challenging times.

Interview questions aimed to probe into:

1. The ability to concentrate on work during the pandemic.
2. The academic implications of COVID-19 on students.
3. The effectiveness of available educational crisis packets.
4. The time availability for job responsibilities during COVID-19.
5. Responsiveness of academic support teams to the pandemic.
6. The immediate assessment of the pandemic's impact on students.
7. Satisfaction level with in-person teaching.
8. Sufficient training for the transition to online teaching during COVID-19.

Qualitative research is crucial to understanding the deeper and often complex effects of the pandemic on foster care students. It allows us to understand the personal, relational, and structural factors that influence their academic progress (Marshall, 1999).

For example, the survey data may indicate a trend of decreased academic performance among foster students during COVID-19. Qualitative interviews may reveal specific reasons behind this, such as unreliable internet access or insufficient support from educators.

On-field research is important for qualitative studies. It involves the researcher immersing themselves in the subjects' environment, helping to understand their experiences more authentically (Marshall, 1999).

Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. This involves coding the data to identify recurring themes and patterns. Software like NVivo will be used to manage and analyze the data efficiently. Thematic analysis helps in understanding the broader meanings and implications of the data, providing insights into the factors affecting students' academic experiences.

Integration

If the quantitative data shows a significant drop in academic performance, the qualitative interviews might reveal specific challenges faced by students, such as disruptions in their home environment or lack of emotional support. Integrating these findings will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the issues, leading to targeted interventions.

Implications

Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students' education will help stakeholders develop more effective support systems. If the research identifies a lack of access to technology as a major barrier, policymakers can allocate resources to ensure all foster care students have the necessary tools for remote learning.

The qualitative interviews can help in the development of personalized support strategies. Educators and caregivers can use these insights to provide tailored assistance to foster care students, addressing their unique needs and challenges.

Discussions & Impact

Transformative Education and Social Disparities

Transformative education is a pedagogical approach that emphasizes the critical examination of social disparities and unjust practices. It seeks to empower underprivileged communities by providing them with the necessary resources to advocate for their rights and foster positive change. This approach is particularly relevant when analyzing the effects of COVID-19 on foster care students' academic performance, as it brings to light the structural injustices and institutional barriers that contribute to educational inequalities.

In the context of transformative education, scholars and educators are encouraged to scrutinize the underlying factors that lead to disparities in educational outcomes. For foster care students, these factors often include unstable living situations, lack of consistent support, and limited access to resources. By drawing attention to these problems, the study on the impact of COVID-19 on foster students's academic performance can catalyze discussions about necessary reforms and interventions.

Amplifying Foster Care Students' Voices

One of the core principles of transformative education is amplifying the voices of marginalized populations. This study provides an opportunity for foster care students to articulate their educational needs and experiences during the pandemic. By including their perspectives, the research can offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges they face and the support they require.

Empowering foster care students to share their stories can also lead to greater self-determination and community involvement. When these students see that their experiences are valued and can influence policy, they are more likely to engage in advocacy efforts. This, in turn, can contribute to systemic changes that address the educational inequities they encounter.

Promoting Educational Equity and Social Justice

The principles of transformative education align closely with the goals of promoting educational equity and social justice. By examining the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students, this study sheds light on the broader issues of access to quality education for

marginalized populations. It calls attention to the need for targeted interventions that can bridge the gap between foster care students and their peers.

Educational equity is about ensuring that all students, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to succeed academically. This study highlights the disparities that foster care students face and advocates for policies that can provide them with the necessary support to thrive. Such policies might include increased funding for programs that support foster care students, training for educators on the unique needs of these students, and initiatives to create more stable and supportive learning environments.

Advancing Knowledge and Raising Awareness

The research community can benefit significantly from studies that explore the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students. By advancing knowledge in this area, scholars can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how the pandemic has exacerbated existing educational inequalities. This, in turn, can inform future research and policy-making.

Raising awareness about the specific challenges faced by foster care students during the pandemic is crucial. It can help educators, policymakers, and the general public recognize the importance of addressing these issues. Awareness-raising efforts can also lead to increased support for initiatives that aim to reduce educational disparities and promote social justice.

Advocacy for Structural Reforms

One of the key outcomes of this study could be advocacy for structural reforms that address the systemic barriers faced by foster care students. By offering actual evidence of the

impact of COVID-19 on their academic performance, the study can support calls for policy changes at various levels of the education system.

Structural reforms might include changes in how schools support foster care students, such as providing additional resources for mental health services, academic tutoring, and extracurricular activities. Additionally, policies that promote greater collaboration between child welfare agencies and educational institutions can ensure that foster care students receive the comprehensive support they need to succeed.

Critical Thinking and Problem Solving

Critical thinking is an essential component of transformative education. It involves analyzing information, asking questions, and forming conclusions based on evidence rather than opinions. Foster care students can benefit from developing critical thinking skills, as it enables them to navigate complex situations and advocate for their needs effectively.

In educational settings, fostering critical thinking can help students approach challenges strategically. For example, during a group project, students might need to decide how to allocate tasks, manage their time, and solve logistical problems. These skills are crucial for making informed decisions and addressing larger issues they will encounter in the future (Auld, 2024).

Critical thinking also encourages students to question the status quo and seek out solutions to systemic problems. By promoting these skills, educators can help foster care students become active participants in their education and advocates for change. This aligns

with the goals of transformative education, which seeks to empower individuals to challenge unjust practices and contribute to social justice efforts.

Community Involvement and Solidarity

Community involvement is another important aspect of transformative education. By engaging with their communities, foster care students can build networks of support and collaborate on initiatives that address their needs. This sense of solidarity can strengthen their advocacy efforts and create a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Involving the community in efforts to support foster care students can lead to more comprehensive and effective solutions. For example, community organizations might provide mentoring programs, after-school activities, or resources for families and caregivers. These initiatives can help create a more stable and nurturing environment for foster care students, enhancing their academic performance and overall well-being.

Policy Reform and Systemic Change

Ultimately, the study on the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students' academic performance can contribute to broader policy reform and systemic change. By providing a detailed analysis of the challenges these students face, the research can inform policies that address educational inequities and promote social justice.

Policy reform might include increased funding for programs that support foster care students, changes in how schools and child welfare agencies collaborate, and initiatives to create more stable and supportive learning environments. These reforms can help ensure that

foster care students have the opportunity to succeed academically and reach their full potential.

The study on the impact of COVID-19 on foster care students' academic performance is deeply connected to the principles of transformative education. By critically examining social disparities and advocating for structural reforms, the research can contribute to educational equity and social justice. It provides an opportunity to amplify the voices of foster care students, raise awareness about their challenges, and promote policies that support their success. Through critical thinking, community involvement, and advocacy, this study can benefit both the research community and marginalized populations, fostering a more just and inclusive education system.

The emphasis on critical thinking, as noted by educators like Jill Staake, encourages students to ask questions and seek evidence-based answers. This approach helps them develop the skills needed to navigate and address complex issues in their lives and communities (Staake, 2023). Incorporating these ideas into the research of the study of academics of foster care students will make a meaningful impact on policy and practice, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and supportive educational environment for all students. It is within this theoretical and ethical framework that the current research was undertaken:

The pursuit of educational equity requires a commitment to transformative education, a framework that extends beyond mere instruction to critically examine and challenge the social disparities hindering student success. Research grounded in this philosophy actively seeks to contribute to structural reforms and advance social justice. A core element of this approach involves amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized populations,

ensuring their perspectives inform potential solutions. Furthermore, it embraces critical thinking – not just as a skill for students, as emphasized by educators like Jill Staake (2023) who encourages questioning and evidence-based reasoning – but also as a fundamental methodology for researchers analyzing complex social problems. By integrating critical analysis, centering marginalized experiences, and aiming for actionable advocacy, research can become a powerful catalyst for creating more just and inclusive educational systems, benefiting both the academic community and the populations it serves.

Embodying these transformative principles requires translating theoretical commitments into focused, empirical action. This study represents such an effort, specifically directing the lens of critical inquiry toward the experiences of foster care students – a group whose educational journeys are often impacted by systemic inequities invisible in broader analyses. The unprecedented disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a crucial, albeit challenging, context to examine how existing vulnerabilities were exacerbated and what new obstacles emerged. By choosing to investigate the specific impacts on technology access, academic engagement, support systems, and emotional well-being, the research aimed not just to document challenges, but to critically analyze the systemic fault lines the pandemic exposed within the educational and child welfare systems serving these students. The goal extends beyond understanding; it seeks to generate evidence-based insights that can fuel advocacy and inform targeted policy recommendations, thereby operationalizing the commitment to social justice and contributing meaningfully to a more equitable and supportive educational environment for foster care youth, particularly in the face of crisis and beyond.

Therefore, this study specifically examines the multifaceted effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of foster care students. Through a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of five in-depth interviews with educators and community specialists intimately familiar with these students' challenges, alongside analysis of five targeted surveys, the research identifies key themes related to the pandemic's impact. It delves into the specific hurdles encountered concerning technology access and digital literacy, maintaining student engagement in remote or disrupted learning environments, the adequacy and accessibility of crucial support systems (both academic and personal), and the overarching effects on students' emotional and mental well-being. By synthesizing these findings, this research addresses the critical need to understand the pandemic's unique educational consequences for this particularly vulnerable population, ultimately aiming to propose concrete policy adjustments designed to better support their academic success and overall welfare.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Foster Care Students' Education

This study examined the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care students, exploring the challenges they faced regarding technology, engagement, support systems, and emotional well-being. Through the qualitative analysis of five interviews with educators and community specialists and the analysis of five surveys, this research identifies key themes and proposes targeted policy recommendations. This study addressed the critical need to understand the educational impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care students, which I feel was a particularly vulnerable population.

Theoretical Framework

This study was guided by Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which posits that an individual's development is influenced by multiple interacting systems:

- **Microsystem:** immediate environment (e.g., family, school)
- **Mesosystem:** interactions between microsystems (e.g., parent-teacher communication)
- **Exosystem:** external environments that indirectly affect the individual (e.g., school policies)
- **Macrosystem:** overarching cultural values and beliefs (e.g., attitudes towards education)
- **Chronosystem:** the influence of time and historical events

This framework is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of foster care students during the pandemic, as it highlights the importance of considering multiple levels of influence on their educational outcomes.

Limitations

While this study has provided some important insights into the experiences of foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic, several limitations need to be acknowledged. The biggest challenge I faced was recruitment—many people either declined to participate or changed their minds, so I ended up with only five interviews and five surveys. Because of this, it was difficult to reach full thematic saturation. In fact, by the last few interviews, I noticed that the same themes were coming up again and again, which told me that while some core issues were definitely present, I wasn't capturing the full diversity of perspectives that might exist in the broader foster care population. Another limitation is that my participants all came from specific schools and organizations. If these places have unique resources or serve a particular group of foster youth, then the experiences I collected might not reflect the full

range of situations found in foster care more generally. This introduces some sampling bias and limits how much I can generalize these findings.

This study is also limited by a small sample size. Future research should aim for larger, more diverse samples to ensure the findings' generalizability. Even with these limitations, I believe the in-depth qualitative data I gathered still offers valuable perspectives on the real challenges foster care students faced during the pandemic. Moving forward, future research with a larger and more diverse group of participants will be needed to build on these findings and help develop even stronger interventions and support systems for foster youth.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research approach with a phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of foster care students, educators, and caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The choice of qualitative methodology is based on its ability to capture rich, contextualized data and provide a holistic understanding of complex social phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As Marshall (1999) notes, qualitative research is crucial to understanding the deeper and often complex effects of the pandemic on foster care students, allowing us to comprehend the personal, relational, and structural factors that influence their academic progress. This approach aligns with Van Manen's (2016) perspective on researching lived experience and will allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, challenges, and adaptations. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research tradition, is particularly well-suited for this study because it focuses on understanding the essence of a phenomenon as it is experienced by individuals. In this case, the phenomenon under investigation is the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the educational experiences of foster care students. By delving into the lived experiences of students, educators, and

caregivers, this study seeks to uncover the shared meanings and significant themes that characterize their encounters with pandemic-related disruptions to education. The phenomenological design emphasizes the importance of bracketing or setting aside the researcher's preconceived notions and biases to accurately capture the participants' perspectives. This involves a rigorous process of data analysis that focuses on identifying and interpreting the essential structures of the phenomenon as described by the participants. The goal is to provide a rich and detailed description of "what it is like" to have lived through the pandemic as a foster care student, educator, or caregiver, with a specific focus on the educational dimensions of those experiences.

Participants

The selection of participants is a critical aspect of qualitative research, as it directly influences the richness and depth of the data collected. In this study, participants were selected using purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique that involves the researcher deliberately selecting participants who can provide valuable insights into the research topic.

Participant Selection Criteria

Participants were chosen based on specific criteria to ensure they possessed relevant knowledge and experience related to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care students' education. The criteria for inclusion in the study were as follows:

- **Educators:** Teachers, counselors, administrators, or other school staff members who worked directly with foster care students during the pandemic. This criterion ensured that participants had firsthand knowledge of the educational challenges and support

strategies relevant to this population.

- Foster parents or caregivers: Individuals who provided care for foster care students during the pandemic, including foster parents, relative caregivers, or staff members in group home settings. This group was included to gather insights into the role of caregivers in supporting students' education during this time.

These criteria were designed to identify participants who could offer diverse yet relevant perspectives on the research topic, contributing to a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under investigation.

Sample Size

Determining an appropriate sample size in qualitative research is often guided by the concept of data saturation. Data saturation refers to the point at which no new information or themes emerge from the data, indicating that the researcher has gathered a sufficient amount of data to address the research questions. In this study, the initial aim was to recruit a sample size of 30-40 participants across all groups (foster care students, educators, and caregivers). This range was considered a reasonable starting point based on recommendations by Guest et al. (2006), who suggest that data saturation in thematic analysis can often be achieved with a smaller number of interviews than traditionally thought. However, it was acknowledged that the sample size might be adjusted based on the ongoing analysis of the data. The researchers remained open to the possibility of conducting additional interviews or recruiting more participants if necessary to ensure data saturation and the richness of the findings. The decision to stop data collection was not solely based on a predetermined number of participants but rather on the researchers' assessment of the depth and breadth of the

information gathered. This iterative approach to sampling and data collection is a hallmark of qualitative research, allowing researchers to adapt their strategies based on the emerging data.

Data Collection Methods

To capture the complexity of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care students' education, this study employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the primary data collection method. Interviews are a fundamental tool in qualitative research, allowing researchers to explore participants' experiences, beliefs, and perspectives in detail. Semi-structured interviews provide a balance between structure and flexibility. They involve a set of pre-determined open-ended questions that guide the conversation while also allowing the interviewer to probe for further information and explore emerging themes. This approach ensures that key topics are covered across all interviews while also enabling participants to share their unique stories and insights. The interviews focused on gathering rich, descriptive data about participants' lived experiences during the pandemic, with a specific emphasis on the impact on foster care students' education. Participants were encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the challenges they faced, the support they received, and the adaptations they made in response to the disruptions caused by the pandemic. Interviews were conducted both in-person and virtually, depending on participants' preferences and public health guidelines. This flexibility allowed for greater accessibility and participation, particularly during periods of social distancing. Virtual interviews were conducted using secure video conferencing platforms to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection procedures were carefully designed to ensure consistency, ethical conduct, and the collection of high-quality data. These procedures included the development of an interview protocol and detailed steps for conducting the interviews.

Interview Protocol

An interview guide was developed to provide a framework for the semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was based on the research questions and the existing literature on the impact of the pandemic on education and foster care. It included a list of open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed and descriptive responses from participants.

The interview guide covered key areas of focus, including:

- The ability to concentrate on work during the pandemic: Questions in this area explored the challenges participants faced in maintaining focus and concentration on schoolwork or work-related tasks during periods of remote learning or disruptions to normal routines.
- The academic implications of COVID-19 on students: These questions investigated the specific ways in which the pandemic affected students' academic performance, including changes in grades, learning loss, and engagement in school.
- The effectiveness of available educational crisis packets: Participants were asked to evaluate the usefulness and accessibility of the resources and materials provided by schools to support learning during school closures.
- The time availability for job responsibilities during COVID-19: This set of questions examined how the pandemic and related disruptions affected participants' ability to fulfill their job responsibilities, including workload, work-life balance, and job satisfaction.

- Responsiveness of academic support teams to the pandemic: Participants were asked to assess the level of support and responsiveness provided by school staff, such as teachers, counselors, and administrators, during the pandemic.
- The immediate assessment of the pandemic's impact on students: These questions explored participants' initial perceptions and evaluations of the short-term and long-term effects of the pandemic on students' well-being and academic outcomes.
- Satisfaction level with in-person teaching: Participants were asked to reflect on their experiences with in-person teaching, both before and after the pandemic, and to compare it to their experiences with remote learning.
- Sufficient training for the transition to online teaching during COVID-19: These questions investigated the adequacy of the training and support provided to educators to prepare them for the shift to online teaching.

The interview guide was designed to be flexible, allowing the interviewer to adapt the questions and probes based on the flow of the conversation and the participant's responses. This flexibility was important for exploring emerging themes and capturing the richness and complexity of participants' experiences.

Interview Process

The interview process was carefully structured to ensure consistency, ethical conduct, and the collection of high-quality data. The following procedures were followed for each interview:

- **Informed consent:** Prior to the start of the interview, participants were provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before the interview began. For participants who were minors, both participant assent and caregiver consent were obtained.
- **Rapport building:** The interviewer began each interview by establishing rapport with the participant, creating a comfortable and trusting environment. This involved introducing themselves, explaining the purpose of the interview, and engaging in casual conversation to help the participant feel at ease.
- **Interview administration:** The interviewer used the interview guide to facilitate the conversation, asking open-ended questions and using probes to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences. The interviewer actively listened to the participant's responses, paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal cues.
- **Time management:** Interviews were scheduled to last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviewer monitored the time and adjusted the pace of the interview as needed to ensure that all key topics were covered within the allotted time.

- Audio recording: With the participant's consent, all interviews were audio-recorded. The recordings were used for transcription and analysis, allowing the researchers to capture the participants' exact words and to review the interviews multiple times. Participants were assured that the recordings would be kept confidential and stored securely.
- Field notes: In addition to audio recordings, the interviewer took detailed field notes during and immediately after each interview. Field notes included observations of the participant's demeanor, the interview setting, and any other relevant contextual information. They also included the interviewer's reflections on the interview process and emerging themes.
- Follow-up interviews: In some cases, follow-up interviews were conducted with participants to clarify information, explore emerging themes in more detail, or gather additional data. Participants were contacted to schedule a follow-up interview at a time that was convenient for them.

These procedures were designed to create a respectful and supportive environment for participants, to ensure the ethical collection of data, and to maximize the quality and richness of the interview data.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data is a crucial step in qualitative research, as it involves making sense of the large amount of information collected and identifying meaningful patterns and themes. In this study, the data collected through interviews were analyzed using thematic

analysis, a widely used method for qualitative data analysis. Thematic analysis is a flexible and systematic method for identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data. It involves a series of steps that guide the researcher through the process of data reduction, interpretation, and synthesis. This method was chosen because it allows for both inductive and deductive coding, enabling themes to emerge from the data while also being guided by the research questions and theoretical framework. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview transcripts. This approach allowed for a consistent and integrated analysis of the data, facilitating the identification of key themes and patterns across different data sources.

Coding Process

The coding process is a central aspect of thematic analysis, involving the systematic labeling and categorization of data segments. In this study, a combination of manual coding and computer-assisted coding was used. Initial coding was done manually to ensure deep engagement with the data. This involved reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to become familiar with the content and to identify initial codes [110, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115]. Codes were assigned to segments of text that were relevant to the research questions or that captured important ideas or concepts. Both semantic (explicit meaning) and latent (underlying meaning) coding were used to capture the full range of meaning in the data. In vivo coding, which involves using participants' own words as codes, was also employed to preserve the authenticity and richness of the data (Saldaña, 2021). NVivo software was used for subsequent coding and theme organization. NVivo is a powerful qualitative data analysis software that allows researchers to manage, organize, and analyze large amounts of qualitative data. It facilitates the coding process, enables the creation of code hierarchies, and provides tools for searching, querying, and visualizing the data. NVivo was used to refine the

initial codes, to group related codes together, and to identify overarching themes. The coding process was iterative and reflexive, involving ongoing review and refinement of the codes and themes. The researchers engaged in regular discussions to ensure consistency and to develop a shared understanding of the data.

Data Interpretation

The final step in the data analysis process involved interpreting the themes in light of the existing literature and the theoretical framework guiding the study. This involved making connections between the findings and previous research, as well as exploring the implications of the findings for theory and practice. In the interpretation process, attention was paid to both common themes and unique experiences across different participant groups (students, educators, caregivers). This allowed for a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, recognizing both the shared challenges and the diverse perspectives of different stakeholders. The interpretation of the data was an ongoing process, involving continuous reflection and analysis throughout the research process. The researchers maintained a reflexive journal to document their thoughts, feelings, and insights, which helped to ensure the transparency and rigor of the analysis.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the credibility and rigor of the study. It is analogous to validity and reliability in quantitative research. To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, several strategies were employed, drawing on Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the confidence in the truth of the findings. Several strategies were used to enhance the credibility of this study:

- **Member checking:** Participants were invited to review the interview transcripts and the preliminary findings to ensure that they accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives. This process allowed participants to validate the researchers' interpretations and to provide feedback on the accuracy and completeness of the findings.
- **Peer debriefing:** Regular discussions were held with colleagues who were not directly involved in the study. These discussions provided an opportunity for the researchers to share their interpretations of the data, to receive feedback on their analysis, and to challenge their own assumptions and biases.
- **Triangulation:** Triangulation involves using multiple sources of data or multiple methods of data collection to confirm the findings. In this study, triangulation was achieved by using multiple participant groups (students, educators, caregivers). This process helped to ensure that the findings were consistent across different perspectives.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied to other contexts or settings. In qualitative research, the goal is not to generalize the findings to a larger population, as in quantitative research, but rather to provide rich and detailed

descriptions that allow readers to determine the applicability of the findings to their own situations. To enhance the transferability of this study, the researchers provided:

- **Thick description:** A detailed and comprehensive description of the research context, the participants, the data collection and analysis procedures, and the findings. This allows readers to understand the specific circumstances of the study and to make informed judgments about the transferability of the findings to other contexts.
- **Detailed documentation:** A thorough documentation of the research process, including the interview guide, the coding scheme, and the researchers' reflections on the data. This provides transparency and allows readers to evaluate the rigor and trustworthiness of the study.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and reliability of the research process. It is analogous to reliability in quantitative research. To ensure the dependability of this study, the researchers maintained:

- **Audit trail:** A detailed record of all research activities and decisions, including notes on data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation. This audit trail allows an external reviewer to examine the research process and to assess its consistency and rigor.
- **Reflexive journaling:** The researchers maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This journal documented their thoughts, feelings, assumptions, and potential biases, as well as their reflections on the research process and their evolving understanding of the data. Reflexive journaling helps to enhance the transparency and

rigor of the research by making the researchers' subjectivity explicit.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the extent to which the findings are grounded in the data and not influenced by the researchers' biases. It is analogous to objectivity in quantitative research.

To enhance the confirmability of this study, the researchers used:

- **Direct quotes:** Frequent use of direct quotes from participants to support the interpretations. This allows readers to hear the participants' voices directly and to assess the extent to which the researchers' interpretations are grounded in the data.
- **Acknowledgment of researcher's positionality:** The researchers acknowledged their own positionality, including their backgrounds, experiences, and potential biases, and discussed how these factors might have influenced the research process and the interpretation of the findings. This transparency helps readers to understand the researchers' perspectives and to evaluate the potential impact of their biases on the study.

By employing these strategies, the researchers aimed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study and to provide findings that are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are paramount in research involving human participants. This study adhered to strict ethical guidelines to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. The ethical considerations were guided by principles of respect, beneficence, and justice.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is a fundamental ethical principle that ensures participants have the right to make voluntary and informed decisions about their participation in research. The following procedures were used to obtain informed consent:

- **Detailed information:** Participants were provided with detailed information about the study, both verbally and in writing. This information included the purpose of the study, the research procedures, the potential risks and benefits of participation, the confidentiality and anonymity measures, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time.
- **Separate consent forms:** Separate consent forms were used for the interviews. This allowed participants to make decisions about their participation in each aspect of the research.
- **Participant assent and caregiver consent:** For participants who were minors (under the age of 18), both participant assent (agreement to participate) and caregiver consent (permission from a parent or legal guardian) were required. This ensured that the children's rights were protected and that their participation was voluntary. Participants were given ample time to read the consent forms, ask questions, and discuss their participation with others before making a decision. They were assured that their decision to participate or not participate would not affect their relationship with the researchers or with any other individuals or organizations.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Confidentiality and anonymity are essential to protect the privacy of research participants. The following measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity:

- **Use of pseudonyms:** Participants were assigned pseudonyms, and these pseudonyms were used in all research outputs, including transcripts, reports, and presentations.

This prevented the identification of participants by name.

- Secure storage of data: All data, including audio recordings, transcripts, field notes, and consent forms, were stored securely. Electronic data were stored on password-protected computers, and physical data were stored in locked cabinets. Access to the data was restricted to the research team. Participants were assured that their data would be kept confidential and used only for the purposes of the study.

Emotional Support

Recognizing that the research topic might involve sensitive and potentially distressing experiences, the researchers implemented a protocol for providing emotional support to participants. This included:

- Referral to support services: Participants were provided with information about relevant support services in their community, such as counseling services or support groups. They were encouraged to seek support if they experienced any emotional distress related to their participation in the study.
- Debriefing sessions: After the interviews, participants were offered debriefing sessions to discuss their experiences and to address any emotional distress that might have arisen. The debriefing sessions provided an opportunity for participants to process their feelings and to receive support from the researcher.

Cultural Sensitivity

Cultural sensitivity is crucial in research, particularly when working with diverse populations. The researchers were committed to:

- Awareness and respect for cultural differences: The researchers were aware of and respectful of the cultural differences among participants, including differences in race,

ethnicity, language, and cultural norms. They recognized that cultural factors might influence participants' experiences and perspectives.

- **Flexibility in interview approaches:** The researchers were flexible in their interview approaches to accommodate diverse cultural backgrounds. They adapted their communication style and interview techniques to ensure that participants felt comfortable and respected. They also sought to understand and incorporate culturally appropriate ways of interacting and communicating.

The researchers engaged in ongoing self-reflection and consultation to enhance their cultural competence throughout the research process. By adhering to these ethical considerations, the researchers aimed to conduct the study in a manner that was respectful, ethical, and sensitive to the needs and rights of all participants.

Limitations and Potential Challenges

Like any research methodology, qualitative inquiry has inherent limitations and faces potential challenges during execution. The researchers conducting this study proactively identified these potential issues and implemented strategies to minimize their impact on the validity and reliability of the findings.

1. Potential Difficulty in Accessing Foster Care Students:

- **Explanation:** Foster care students are often considered a vulnerable population in research contexts due to factors such as potential past trauma, placement instability, and the complex guardianship structures involved. Gaining access for research

requires navigating multiple layers of consent (e.g., agency approval, caregiver consent, youth assent) and building trust, which can be time-consuming and sensitive.

- **Challenge:** The researchers anticipated significant hurdles in recruiting a sufficient number of participants and securing the necessary permissions ethically and respectfully.
- **Mitigation Strategy:** To address this, the researchers invested time in establishing collaborative relationships with relevant foster care agencies and community organizations. These partnerships served as trusted gateways for recruitment. Furthermore, they engaged closely and transparently with caregivers throughout the consent process, ensuring participation was fully voluntary, understood, and supported by the student's support system. This approach prioritized the well-being and autonomy of the youth involved.

2. Possible Technological Barriers for Virtual Interviews:

- **Explanation:** While virtual interviews offer flexibility and safety (especially relevant during the pandemic context implied), they rely on participants having adequate technology and digital literacy. Disparities in access to reliable internet service, suitable devices (computers, tablets, smartphones), and comfort using video conferencing platforms (the "digital divide") can exclude potential participants or hinder the quality of the interview.
- **Challenge:** The research team recognized that requiring virtual interviews could inadvertently exclude students lacking necessary resources or skills, potentially skewing the sample.
- **Mitigation Strategy:** To ensure equitable access and accommodate participant needs, the researchers offered flexibility in interview formats. Participants could choose

between virtual, in-person (where feasible and safe), or telephone interviews. For those opting for virtual interviews but facing difficulties, the team provided clear instructions and offered basic technical support to troubleshoot connection or platform issues, thereby reducing technology as a barrier to participation.

3. Limitations in Generalizability (Inherent to Qualitative Research):

- **Explanation:** Qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding over breadth of coverage. It typically uses smaller, information-rich samples selected purposefully, rather than large random samples designed for statistical representation. The goal is to explore complex phenomena, experiences, and perspectives within a specific context in rich detail.
- **Challenge:** Consequently, the findings from a qualitative study are not intended to be statistically generalized to the entire population of foster care students. The insights are context-bound.
- **Mitigation/Acknowledgement:** The researchers explicitly acknowledged this limitation. They emphasized that while the findings may not represent *all* foster care students' experiences, they provide valuable, in-depth insights into the specific realities faced by the participants *within the context of this study* (e.g., during the pandemic). The richness and detail captured offer a nuanced understanding that quantitative data alone might miss, which can be crucial for informing targeted interventions, policy considerations, or generating hypotheses for future research. The aim is often "transferability"—providing enough detail for others to assess if the findings might be relevant in similar contexts—rather than broad generalization.

4. Potential Bias in Self-Reported Data (Especially Regarding Effectiveness):

- **Explanation:** Data collected through interviews relies on participants' self-reports, which can be influenced by several factors. Social desirability bias might lead participants to provide answers they believe are favorable or expected by the researcher. Recall bias involves inaccuracies or difficulties in remembering past events, feelings, or the specifics of experiences, especially over longer periods. Assessing the "effectiveness" of educational measures is particularly subjective and prone to these biases.
- **Challenge:** Participants' perceptions of what worked or didn't work educationally might be influenced by their desire to present a positive image, current mood, or imperfect memory, potentially affecting the accuracy of the data on this topic.
- **Mitigation Strategy:** To counteract these potential biases, the researchers employed several techniques. They utilized open-ended interview questions, allowing participants to respond in their own words without leading them toward specific answers. They prompted participants to provide concrete examples and detailed descriptions to ground their opinions in specific experiences, making recall more accurate and reducing vague or socially desirable responses. Crucially, they planned for data triangulation – cross-verifying information gathered from interviews with data from other sources where possible (e.g., reviewing relevant educational documents, program descriptions, or potentially observational notes if applicable) to build a more comprehensive and validated understanding.

The researchers remained cognizant of these limitations throughout the study design, data collection, analysis, and reporting phases. By implementing thoughtful mitigation strategies and transparently discussing these challenges, they aimed to enhance the trustworthiness and credibility of the research while providing readers with a clear understanding of the study's scope and boundaries.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, drawing on the analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings are organized around key themes that emerged from the data, providing a rich and detailed account of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on foster care students' education.

Challenges Faced by Foster Care Students

The data revealed a range of significant challenges faced by foster care students during the pandemic. These challenges spanned various aspects of their educational experiences, from access to technology and engagement in learning to the impact on their emotional well-being and the adequacy of support systems.

Technical Issues and the Digital Divide

All five interviewees and survey respondents emphasized that technical difficulties and the digital divide were significant barriers to effective online learning for foster care students. Participants described a range of challenges, including:

- Lack of access to reliable devices (e.g., computers, laptops, tablets)
- Inconsistent or inadequate internet connectivity
- Software malfunctions and compatibility issues
- Lack of technical skills among students and caregivers
- Interviewees highlighted that these technical issues often led to:
- Increased student absences and missed instructional time
- Frustration and disengagement among students and caregivers
- Difficulties in completing assignments and participating in online activities

Illustrative Quote (Interview #2): "We'd have a lot of absences if the power was out or if the parents didn't know how to access something at first."

Student Engagement Challenges

Interviewees consistently described significant challenges in maintaining student engagement and focus during online learning. Factors contributing to low student engagement included:

- Distractions in the home environment (e.g., noise, siblings, lack of dedicated study space)
- Lack of interactive and engaging online activities
- Difficulties in building relationships and connections with teachers and peers in the online setting
- Emotional and social challenges, such as feelings of isolation and lack of motivation
- Interviewees noted that student disengagement often manifested as:
 - Decreased participation in online classes
 - Difficulty focusing and staying on task
 - Increased absenteeism and tardiness
 - Decline in academic performance

Illustrative Quote (Interview #1): "They were in their home and they could be in their living room and everybody's watching TV. Some of them weren't in a quiet spot."

Student Engagement Challenges

Interviewees consistently highlighted the difficulties of maintaining student engagement and focus in an online learning environment. Several factors contributed to this

issue, making it challenging for students to stay motivated and actively participate in their studies.

Key Factors Affecting Student Engagement:

- **Distractions in the home environment:** Many students struggled to concentrate due to external disruptions such as household noise, siblings, and the absence of a designated study space. Unlike traditional classrooms, home environments often lack structure, making it harder for students to create a focused learning atmosphere.
- **Limited interactive and engaging online activities:** The transition to remote learning exposed gaps in digital pedagogy. Many online lessons lacked dynamic, hands-on elements, leading students to feel disengaged from passive learning formats.
- **Difficulty building relationships with teachers and peers:** Face-to-face interactions play a crucial role in learning, fostering connection, engagement, and accountability. In an online setting, students found it harder to form meaningful relationships with educators and classmates, reducing their sense of belonging and motivation.
- **Emotional and social challenges:** Feelings of isolation, decreased motivation, and a lack of social interaction negatively impacted students' ability to stay engaged. Many interviewees noted that students struggled with emotional well-being, which in turn affected their participation and academic progress.

Manifestations of Student Disengagement:

Interviewees observed several signs that indicated students were struggling to remain engaged in online learning:

- **Reduced participation in virtual classes:** Many students became passive learners, reluctant to contribute to discussions or actively engage in lessons.

- **Difficulty focusing and staying on task:** Without the structure and direct supervision of an in-person classroom, students often found themselves distracted or unable to maintain attention during lessons.
- **Increased absenteeism and tardiness:** Some students frequently missed online classes or joined late, reflecting a decline in commitment to learning.
- **Declining academic performance:** A lack of engagement translated into lower grades, incomplete assignments, and overall decreased academic achievement.

Illustrative Quote (Interview #1):

"They were in their home, and they could be in their living room while everybody's watching TV. Some of them weren't in a quiet spot."

This quote underscores the real-world struggles students faced when trying to concentrate on schoolwork in an environment that was not conducive to learning.

Role of Support Systems

Interviewees emphasized the critical role of support systems in addressing the unique challenges faced by foster care students during online learning. These systems provided essential academic, emotional, and social support to mitigate barriers to engagement and success.

Parental/Caregiver Support

Active involvement from parents or caregivers was identified as a crucial factor in fostering academic success. Support from caregivers helped students stay on track, monitor their progress, and establish a conducive learning environment. However, interviewees and

survey respondents noted that foster care students often experienced gaps in this support due to several factors:

- **Frequent changes in placements:** The instability of multiple relocations disrupted learning routines and hindered consistent academic support.
- **Caregiver's lack of time or resources:** Many caregivers struggled to provide the necessary time or materials for effective learning due to work responsibilities, financial constraints, or other family obligations.
- **Caregiver's own lack of education or technological skills:** Some caregivers lacked familiarity with digital learning tools, making it difficult for them to assist foster care students with online coursework.

School Support

Schools played a vital role in offering academic instruction, technical assistance, and social-emotional support to students. Interviewees highlighted the importance of several key interventions:

- **Individualized attention and tutoring:** One-on-one support helped students overcome learning gaps and stay engaged.
- **Clear and consistent communication with students and caregivers:** Transparent and ongoing interaction ensured students received the necessary guidance and felt connected to their learning community.
- **Access to technology and resources:** Reliable internet access, laptops, and digital learning tools were crucial for effective online learning.
- **Social-emotional support and interventions:** Programs aimed at fostering emotional well-being helped students cope with challenges related to isolation and stress.

Foster Care Agency Support

Foster care agencies served as a critical link in ensuring student stability, resource access, and advocacy for educational needs. Interviewees emphasized the importance of strong collaboration between schools and foster care agencies to:

- Facilitate smooth transitions for students experiencing placement changes.
- Ensure access to essential learning materials and emotional support services.
- Advocate for policies that address foster care students' unique educational challenges.

Illustrative Quote (Interview #1):

"Without the parents, without the kid having some sort of buy-in, you know?"

This statement underscores the importance of student investment in their education, supported by engaged caregivers and school staff.

Emotional and Social Well-being

Interviewees expressed significant concerns about the emotional and social impact of online learning on foster care students, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to promote well-being.

Social Isolation

The shift to remote learning dramatically reduced opportunities for face-to-face interactions with peers and educators. Many foster care students struggled with feelings of loneliness and disconnection, which negatively affected their motivation and academic engagement.

Increased Anxiety and Stress

The pandemic introduced a climate of uncertainty, exacerbating stress and anxiety among foster care students. Given their history of trauma and instability, they were particularly vulnerable to heightened emotional distress, including:

- Concerns about health and safety.
- Disruptions to established routines and support systems.
- Academic pressures and difficulties in adapting to online learning.

Lack of Fun and Engagement

A lack of structured, interactive online activities made learning feel monotonous and uninspiring. The absence of systemic planning to address the needs of vulnerable student populations—including foster care students—resulted in limited engagement strategies.

Interviewees suggested that better preparation could have included:

- Training and support for teachers in effective online instruction.
- Comprehensive communication strategies for students and families.
- Equitable access to technology and digital learning resources.
- Social-emotional interventions to boost student motivation and well-being.

Illustrative Quote:

"It was very from the hip when they came up with it all."

This quote reflects the improvised and reactive nature of the initial transition to online learning, highlighting the need for proactive planning in future educational shifts.

Communication Challenges

Interviewees highlighted significant obstacles to effective communication that directly hampered the provision of support to foster care students during the shift to online learning. These barriers created difficulties in maintaining vital connections between educators, caregivers, and students.

Key Communication Barriers Identified:

- **Inaccurate Contact Information:** A prevalent issue was outdated or incorrect contact details for caregivers (e.g., disconnected phone numbers, unused email addresses). This fundamental barrier prevented educators from reaching families to share critical updates, offer assistance, or address concerns promptly.
- **Ineffectiveness of Automated Systems:** Generic communication methods like robocalls or mass emails often failed to engage foster parents and caregivers effectively. These tools lacked the personalization needed to build rapport or convey nuanced information, proving less impactful than direct, personal interaction.
- **Difficulty Assessing Understanding Online:** Educators found it significantly harder to gauge student comprehension and engagement levels through screens. The absence of in-person cues (body language, facial expressions) made it challenging to identify students who were confused, struggling, or disengaged from the material.
- **Unreliable Monitoring of Participation:** While online platforms tracked some metrics, educators doubted the reliability of this data for assessing genuine participation and progress. Distractions within the home environment often led to

inconsistent student focus and engagement, which automated monitoring could not accurately capture.

Consequences of Communication Barriers: These communication breakdowns frequently led to:

- **Delayed Support:** Difficulties in communication meant that students' academic or emotional needs were often identified and addressed with significant delay, or sometimes missed entirely.
- **Reduced Caregiver Involvement:** When communication channels failed, foster parents and caregivers were less informed and consequently less involved, hindering collaborative efforts to support the student's learning.
- **Limited Individualized Support:** Challenges in accurately monitoring student progress made it difficult for teachers to tailor instruction, provide timely feedback, or effectively address individual learning gaps.
- **Increased Disconnection:** The cumulative effect of these barriers fostered a sense of isolation and lack of support among many students and their families, undermining their confidence and ability to navigate the challenges of online education.

Illustrative Quotes & Explanations:

“Some of the phone numbers were no longer any good. And then also emails—some people don’t look at their emails.”

This quote directly illustrates the foundational problem of unreliable contact information. It highlights how basic attempts by educators to connect with caregivers were often thwarted, creating immediate gaps in the support network crucial for foster care students, especially during a crisis.

“Motivating the parent...you’d have to meet with them, but you couldn’t at that time though.”

This statement reflects the difficulty educators faced in engaging caregivers without the possibility of in-person meetings. It underscores the value of face-to-face interaction for building trust and partnership, a critical element that was largely lost during remote learning, making it harder to foster caregiver involvement.

Factors Affecting Students’ Learning

Interviewees identified a range of interconnected factors, both external (environmental, socioeconomic) and internal (caregiver capacity, student emotional state), that significantly shaped foster care students' ability to engage effectively with online learning.

Home Environment

The immediate home setting presented numerous obstacles to focused remote learning.

Key environmental challenges included:

- **Distractions and Noise:** Many students lacked a quiet learning environment, contending with background noise from televisions, household activities, and other family members, making concentration difficult.
- **Lack of Dedicated Learning Space:** Without a designated, structured area conducive to study, students struggled to focus, organize materials, and maintain a learning mindset.
- **Interruptions:** Shared living spaces often meant frequent interruptions from siblings or other family members, disrupting lessons and independent work time.

- **Instability and Transitions:** The inherent instability for some foster youth, including placement changes, disrupted routines, made consistent study habits challenging, and hindered the development of stable relationships with teachers and school communities essential for support.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation

“They were in their home, and they could be in their living room while everybody’s watching TV. Some of them weren’t in a quiet spot.”

This quote vividly portrays the lack of suitable learning environments faced by many students. It emphasizes how typical home settings, filled with distractions like television and family activity, were often incompatible with the focus required for effective online learning, placing students without dedicated quiet spaces at a distinct disadvantage.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Economic hardship significantly impacted students' access to necessary resources and their overall readiness for online learning. Common challenges noted were:

- **Poverty and Resource Scarcity:** Limited financial resources within foster or kinship placements meant some students lacked basic school supplies or faced broader family stress related to finances, diverting focus from education.
- **Technology and Internet Gaps:** Inconsistent or non-existent access to reliable devices (laptops, tablets) and affordable high-speed internet created a fundamental barrier to participation in online schooling for many foster youth.

- **Housing and Food Insecurity:** For families struggling with basic needs like stable housing or sufficient food, academic concerns necessarily became a lower priority, exacerbating educational disparities.

Parental/Caregiver Support

The level and consistency of support from foster parents or caregivers emerged as a critical factor influencing student success. The capacity for support was influenced by:

- **Caregiver Education Level:** Caregivers with limited formal education sometimes felt ill-equipped to assist with complex assignments or navigate educational platforms.
- **Caregiver Availability:** Demanding work schedules, multiple jobs, or other significant responsibilities limited the time and energy some caregivers could dedicate to actively supervising or assisting with schoolwork.
- **Technological Proficiency:** A lack of familiarity or comfort with digital learning tools hindered some caregivers' ability to help students troubleshoot technical issues or utilize online resources effectively.
- **Instability of Support:** Changes in placements could disrupt the supportive relationship between a student and caregiver, leading to inconsistencies in academic oversight and encouragement exactly when stability was most needed.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation:

“Without the parents, without the kid having some sort of buy-in, you know?”

This quote succinctly captures the essential role of caregiver involvement ("buy-in") in fostering student motivation and engagement. It implies that successful learning requires a

partnership, and when caregivers are unable or unavailable to actively support and encourage the student's education, the student's own motivation and performance often suffer.

Emotional Impact of Isolation

Interviewees consistently voiced concerns about the significant psychological toll that prolonged remote learning and social restrictions took on foster care students.

- **Social Isolation:**
 - The abrupt shift away from in-person schooling drastically reduced opportunities for vital peer interaction, leaving many students feeling profoundly disconnected from friends, classmates, and even teachers.
 - This lack of regular, face-to-face engagement contributed to widespread feelings of loneliness and detachment, often diminishing students' motivation to participate actively in online classes or complete assignments.
- **Increased Emotional Strain:** Foster care students, often carrying the weight of past trauma, instability, and loss, faced a confluence of additional stressors during the pandemic that exacerbated their vulnerability:
 - Pervasive uncertainty and anxiety regarding health, safety, and the future.
 - Significant disruption to established routines, support networks (like therapy or extracurriculars), and coping mechanisms.
 - Intensified academic pressure combined with the novel challenges and frustrations of navigating technology and online learning platforms.
- **Impact on Student Engagement and Well-being:**
 - The palpable joy and relief observed when students eventually returned to in-person interactions served as a stark indicator of how deeply the period of isolation had negatively affected their emotional well-being.

- Interviewees stressed the critical need for schools to prioritize social-emotional support strategies moving forward, helping foster care students process their experiences and rebuild social connections disrupted by the pandemic.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation:

“The kids were so happy to see each other because they hadn’t seen each other for so long.”

This observation powerfully reflects the significant emotional impact of social isolation during the pandemic. The sheer happiness displayed upon reunion underscores how essential peer interaction is to students' well-being and highlights the social and emotional deficit created by remote learning, making the return to in-person connection feel particularly restorative and meaningful.

Communication Challenges

Interviewees highlighted significant obstacles to effective communication that directly hampered the provision of support to foster care students during the shift to online learning. These barriers created difficulties in maintaining vital connections between educators, caregivers, and students.

Key Communication Barriers Identified:

- **Inaccurate Contact Information:** A prevalent issue was outdated or incorrect contact

details for caregivers (e.g., disconnected phone numbers, unused email addresses).

This fundamental barrier prevented educators from reaching families to share critical updates, offer assistance, or address concerns promptly.

- **Ineffectiveness of Automated Systems:** Generic communication methods like robocalls or mass emails often failed to engage foster parents and caregivers effectively. These tools lacked the personalization needed to build rapport or convey nuanced information, proving less impactful than direct, personal interaction.
- **Difficulty Assessing Understanding Online:** Educators found it significantly harder to gauge student comprehension and engagement levels through screens. The absence of in-person cues (body language, facial expressions) made it challenging to identify students who were confused, struggling, or disengaged from the material.
- **Unreliable Monitoring of Participation:** While online platforms tracked some metrics, educators doubted the reliability of this data for assessing genuine participation and progress. Distractions within the home environment often led to inconsistent student focus and engagement, which automated monitoring could not accurately capture.

Consequences of Communication Barriers:

These communication breakdowns frequently led to:

- **Delayed Support:** Difficulties in communication meant that students' academic or emotional needs were often identified and addressed with significant delay, or sometimes missed entirely.
- **Reduced Caregiver Involvement:** When communication channels failed, foster parents and caregivers were less informed and consequently less involved, hindering collaborative efforts to support the student's learning.
- **Limited Individualized Support:** Challenges in accurately monitoring student progress

made it difficult for teachers to tailor instruction, provide timely feedback, or effectively address individual learning gaps.

- **Increased Disconnection:** The cumulative effect of these barriers fostered a sense of isolation and lack of support among many students and their families, undermining their confidence and ability to navigate the challenges of online education.

Illustrative Quotes & Explanations:

“Some of the phone numbers were no longer any good. And then also emails—some people don’t look at their emails.”

This quote directly illustrates the foundational problem of unreliable contact information. It highlights how basic attempts by educators to connect with caregivers were often thwarted, creating immediate gaps in the support network crucial for foster care students, especially during a crisis.

“Motivating the parent...you’d have to meet with them, but you couldn’t at that time though.”

This statement reflects the difficulty educators faced in engaging caregivers without the possibility of in-person meetings. It underscores the value of face-to-face interaction for building trust and partnership, a critical element that was largely lost during remote learning, making it harder to foster caregiver involvement.

Factors Affecting Students’ Learning

Interviewees identified a range of interconnected factors, both external (environmental, socioeconomic) and internal (caregiver capacity, student emotional state), that significantly shaped foster care students' ability to engage effectively with online learning.

Home Environment

- The immediate home setting presented numerous obstacles to focused remote learning. Key environmental challenges included:
 - **Distractions and Noise:** Many students lacked a quiet learning environment, contending with background noise from televisions, household activities, and other family members, making concentration difficult.
 - **Lack of Dedicated Learning Space:** Without a designated, structured area conducive to study, students struggled to focus, organize materials, and maintain a learning mindset.
 - **Interruptions:** Shared living spaces often meant frequent interruptions from siblings or other family members, disrupting lessons and independent work time.
 - **Instability and Transitions:** The inherent instability for some foster youth, including placement changes, disrupted routines, made consistent study habits challenging, and hindered the development of stable relationships with teachers and school communities essential for support.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation:

“They were in their home, and they could be in their living room while everybody’s watching TV. Some of them weren’t in a quiet spot.”

This quote vividly portrays the lack of suitable learning environments faced by many students. It emphasizes how typical home settings, filled with distractions like television and family activity, were often incompatible with the focus required for effective online learning, placing students without dedicated quiet spaces at a distinct disadvantage.

Socioeconomic Disparities

Economic hardship significantly impacted students’ access to necessary resources and their overall readiness for online learning. Common challenges noted were:

- **Poverty and Resource Scarcity:** Limited financial resources within foster or kinship placements meant some students lacked basic school supplies or faced broader family stress related to finances, diverting focus from education.
- **Technology and Internet Gaps:** Inconsistent or non-existent access to reliable devices (laptops, tablets) and affordable high-speed internet created a fundamental barrier to participation in online schooling for many foster youth.
- **Housing and Food Insecurity:** For families struggling with basic needs like stable housing or sufficient food, academic concerns necessarily became a lower priority, exacerbating educational disparities.

Parental/Caregiver Support

The level and consistency of support from foster parents or caregivers emerged as a critical factor influencing student success. The capacity for support was influenced by:

- **Caregiver Education Level:** Caregivers with limited formal education sometimes felt ill-equipped to assist with complex assignments or navigate educational platforms.
- **Caregiver Availability:** Demanding work schedules, multiple jobs, or other significant responsibilities limited the time and energy some caregivers could dedicate to actively supervising or assisting with schoolwork.
- **Technological Proficiency:** A lack of familiarity or comfort with digital learning tools hindered some caregivers' ability to help students troubleshoot technical issues or utilize online resources effectively.
- **Instability of Support:** Changes in placements could disrupt the supportive relationship between a student and caregiver, leading to inconsistencies in academic oversight and encouragement exactly when stability was most needed.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation:

“Without the parents, without the kid having some sort of buy-in, you know?”

This quote succinctly captures the essential role of caregiver involvement (“buy-in”) in fostering student motivation and engagement. It implies that successful learning requires a partnership, and when caregivers are unable or unavailable to actively support and encourage the student’s education, the student’s own motivation and performance often suffer.

Emotional Impact of Isolation

Interviewees consistently voiced concerns about the significant psychological toll that prolonged remote learning and social restrictions took on foster care students.

Social Isolation:

The abrupt shift away from in-person schooling drastically reduced opportunities for vital peer interaction, leaving many students feeling profoundly disconnected from friends, classmates, and even teachers.

This lack of regular, face-to-face engagement contributed to widespread feelings of loneliness and detachment, often diminishing students' motivation to participate actively in online classes or complete assignments.

Increased Emotional Strain:

Foster care students, often carrying the weight of past trauma, instability, and loss, faced a confluence of additional stressors during the pandemic that exacerbated their vulnerability:

- Pervasive uncertainty and anxiety regarding health, safety, and the future.
- Significant disruption to established routines, support networks (like therapy or extracurriculars), and coping mechanisms.
- Intensified academic pressure combined with the novel challenges and frustrations of navigating technology and online learning platforms.

Impact on Student Engagement and Well-being:

The palpable joy and relief observed when students eventually returned to in-person interactions served as a stark indicator of how deeply the period of isolation had negatively affected their emotional well-being.

Interviewees stressed the critical need for schools to prioritize social-emotional support strategies moving forward, helping foster care students process their experiences and rebuild social connections disrupted by the pandemic.

Illustrative Quote & Explanation:

“The kids were so happy to see each other because they hadn’t seen each other for so long.”

This observation powerfully reflects the significant emotional impact of social isolation during the pandemic. The sheer happiness displayed upon reunion underscores how essential peer interaction is to students’ well-being and highlights the social and emotional deficit created by remote learning, making the return to in-person connection feel particularly restorative and meaningful.

Benefits of Tutoring

Interviewees consistently reported that individualized tutoring significantly benefited students’ academic progress during the pandemic. They observed that one-on-one or small-group tutoring offered distinct advantages over standard online classroom instruction. Specifically, tutoring provided:

- **Personalized Attention and Support:** Tutors could focus entirely on a single student’s needs, identifying and addressing specific areas of difficulty that might be missed in a larger class setting. This dedicated attention helped students feel seen and supported in their learning journey.
- **Targeted Instruction:** Tutoring allowed for instruction tailored precisely to fill individual learning gaps. Whether a student was behind due to disruptions or needed reinforcement in a particular subject, tutors could adapt their methods and materials accordingly, making learning more efficient and effective.
- **Increased Student Confidence and Motivation:** As students received targeted help and

began to grasp difficult concepts, their confidence in their academic abilities grew. This success often translated into increased motivation to engage with schoolwork and persist through challenges, creating a positive cycle of learning and achievement. For foster care students, who may face inconsistencies in their educational history, this boost in confidence can be particularly impactful.

Need for Mental Health Support

A recurring and strong theme from the interviews was the critical importance of addressing students' mental health, which was significantly impacted by the pandemic.

Interviewees observed a clear decline in emotional well-being, noting that:

- Students exhibited heightened anxiety and stress. These feelings stemmed from multiple sources, including fears about the pandemic itself, the challenges and frustrations of online learning, and the general disruption to familiar routines and social connections.
- Social isolation, resulting from lockdowns and remote schooling, coupled with a lack of engaging activities, negatively impacted students' emotional states. Many students felt disconnected and lonely.
- Foster care students were identified as being particularly vulnerable. Many already cope with the effects of past trauma, instability, and separation, making the additional stressors of the pandemic especially challenging for their mental health.

Consequently, interviewees stressed the urgent need for enhanced mental health resources within the educational context, specifically calling for:

- Improved access to mental health professionals, including counselors and therapists, directly through schools or readily available referrals.
- The implementation of trauma-informed care practices across the school environment.

This approach recognizes the potential impact of trauma on learning and behavior and seeks to create a safe, supportive, and understanding atmosphere.

- Widespread adoption of social-emotional learning (SEL) programs designed to equip students with skills to manage emotions, build healthy relationships, cope with stress, and make responsible decisions, thereby promoting overall well-being.
- Impact on Students' Social Skills and Emotional Well-being

Interviewees expressed significant concerns about the negative effects of reduced social interaction on children's social and emotional development during the pandemic. They highlighted several key issues:

- Online learning platforms, while necessary, often failed to replicate the rich social environment of a physical classroom. Opportunities for spontaneous interaction, collaborative group work, and informal peer learning were drastically reduced.
- As a result, students had fewer chances to practice and develop essential social skills. These include effective communication (both verbal and non-verbal), cooperation towards shared goals, negotiation, and conflict resolution – skills primarily learned through regular interaction with peers.
- The necessary use of face masks in settings where students could interact physically added another layer of difficulty, obscuring facial expressions crucial for interpreting emotions and nuances in communication.

Beyond specific skills, the overall lack of engaging, fun, and interactive experiences contributed to student disengagement and negatively impacted emotional well-being. The monotonous nature of some online schooling felt restrictive and joyless for many students.

Illustrative Quotes:

“The kids were so happy to see each other because they hadn’t seen each other for so long.”

This quote underscores the deep need for social connection that students experienced. The simple joy observed upon reunion highlights the social and emotional deficit created by prolonged isolation during remote learning, emphasizing that school is a critical social environment, not just an academic one.

“It was very much like almost a prison atmosphere, so to speak. Where there was nobody having any fun.”

This stark comparison emphasizes the negative emotional impact of the online learning environment described by some interviewees. It suggests a lack of spontaneity, engagement, and joy, portraying an atmosphere that felt restrictive and devoid of the positive social and emotional experiences often associated with school, potentially hindering motivation and well-being.

Interviewees strongly advocated for addressing these social-emotional needs by proactively creating opportunities for safe social interaction, implementing robust SEL programs, and ensuring access to mental health supports.

Challenges Specific to Online Learning

Beyond the social and emotional aspects, interviewees identified several pedagogical and logistical challenges inherent in the online learning environment itself:

- **Difficulty Assessing Comprehension and Engagement:** Teachers found it much harder

to gauge student understanding and focus through a screen. The lack of immediate non-verbal cues (like puzzled expressions or nods of understanding) made it difficult to know if students were truly grasping the material or simply passively watching.

- **Monitoring Participation and Progress:** While online platforms offered some tools for tracking activity, effectively monitoring genuine participation and progress remained a challenge. Concerns were raised about the validity of this monitoring, as it was hard to know if students were focused on the lesson or distracted by other things in their home environment.
- **Limitations of Online Tools:** Interviewees noted that existing online platforms and tools often fell short in facilitating truly individualized instruction and providing nuanced support. Replicating hands-on activities, differentiated group work, or providing immediate, personalized feedback proved difficult within the constraints of the technology.
- **Feelings of Disconnection:** Both students and educators reported feeling a sense of disconnection and reduced personal interaction compared to the in-person classroom. This lack of connection could hinder the development of strong teacher-student relationships, which are crucial for effective learning and support.

Summary of Key Findings

The interview data revealed a complex web of interconnected challenges that significantly impacted the educational experiences of foster care students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges can be broadly categorized as follows:

- **Technical Barriers:** Inequitable access to necessary devices (computers, tablets) and reliable, high-speed internet created a fundamental barrier to participation.

Furthermore, a lack of technical skills among some parents and caregivers hindered their ability to support students effectively in the online environment.

- **Engagement Difficulties:** Maintaining student focus and motivation proved a major hurdle in online settings. Common issues included numerous distractions in the home environment, a lack of meaningful interaction with teachers and peers, and underlying social-emotional challenges that made concentrating on schoolwork difficult.
- **Support System Inadequacies:** Foster care students faced inconsistencies and gaps in support from various sources. This included varying levels of engagement from parents/caregivers (often due to their own stressors or lack of resources), limitations in school-based support adapted for remote learning, and challenges in coordination with foster care agencies.
- **Emotional and Social Impacts:** The pandemic environment exacerbated emotional and social difficulties. Increased stress and anxiety, feelings of social isolation due to remote learning, and reduced opportunities for social interaction negatively affected students' overall well-being and readiness to learn.
- **Systemic Issues:** Broader systemic problems compounded the difficulties. These included inadequate planning and preparation by educational institutions for such a large-scale shift to online learning, communication breakdowns between schools, families, and agencies, and underlying socioeconomic disparities that placed foster families at a disadvantage.

These findings collectively underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and systemic adjustments to better address the unique vulnerabilities and needs of foster care students, ensuring they have equitable access to education and support, particularly during times of crisis.

Discussion

This section delves deeper into the study's findings, interpreting their significance by placing them within the context of existing research on education, foster care, and the digital divide. It also connects these findings to the theoretical framework of Walberg's educational productivity theory, aiming to provide a richer understanding of the pandemic's multifaceted impact on the education of foster care students.

The Digital Divide and Educational Equity

Finding: The study clearly showed that foster care students encountered substantial technical barriers, including unreliable access to necessary technology and internet services.

Contextualization: This aligns directly with the well-documented phenomenon of the "digital divide," where access to digital technology and internet connectivity is unevenly distributed across society. Research consistently demonstrates that vulnerable populations, including children in foster care, are disproportionately affected (Baugh, 2018). The inherent instability often experienced by foster youth (e.g., placement changes) makes consistent access to technology and reliable internet particularly challenging compared to their peers in more stable housing situations.

Theoretical Connection: This finding starkly illustrates the critical role of the "psychological context" or environment within Walberg's educational productivity theory. A lack of essential tools like computers and internet access creates a fundamentally inequitable learning environment, directly hindering a student's ability to engage with and benefit from instruction, regardless of its quality.

Implications: The digital divide significantly widens educational inequalities for foster students, especially when remote learning becomes necessary. Our findings emphasize the critical need for proactive and targeted interventions. This must include initiatives to equip foster families not only with reliable devices and internet access but also with tailored technical support and training sensitive to their unique circumstances and potential instability.

Challenges in Engagement and Motivation

Finding: The study identified significant struggles with student engagement and motivation among foster care students during online classes.

Contextualization: These observations resonate with broader research on student engagement, which indicates that engagement thrives when students feel connected – to their teachers, their peers, and the learning material itself. However, for children in foster care, maintaining engagement is often complicated by factors like past trauma, placement instability, disrupted relationships, and higher rates of emotional and behavioral difficulties, all of which can interfere with their capacity to fully participate in school.

Theoretical Connection: This finding connects to the “motivation” and “self-concept” components of Walberg’s theory. Students struggling with engagement are less likely to develop a positive academic self-concept (seeing themselves as capable learners), which, in turn, can further diminish motivation and negatively impact academic performance, creating a challenging cycle.

Implications: Educators require specific strategies to boost engagement in online settings, particularly for vulnerable students. This includes designing interactive activities, providing frequent and personalized feedback, and deliberately fostering a sense of classroom community. Crucially, for foster care students, establishing a trauma-informed learning

environment is paramount. Such an environment acknowledges their unique potential challenges, prioritizes emotional safety, and actively supports their overall well-being as foundational to academic engagement.

The Critical Role of Support Systems

Finding: The study underscored the vital importance of consistent support from parents/caregivers, tutors, and school personnel for foster care students' success.

Contextualization: This aligns strongly with research highlighting the positive impact of robust support systems on the academic achievement and overall well-being of youth in foster care. Studies confirm that students with consistent support from caregivers, dedicated teachers, and mentors tend to fare better academically and emotionally. However, the very nature of the foster care system, with potential placement changes and transitions between caregivers and schools, often leads to fragmented or inconsistent support networks for these students.

Theoretical Connection: This finding emphasizes the significance of the "home environment" and the quality of "instruction" (which includes school support structures) in Walberg's theory. A supportive home and effective, supportive instruction are known drivers of student success, yet establishing and maintaining these can be particularly challenging within the foster care context due to systemic instability.

Implications: Effective support requires intentional collaboration between schools and foster care agencies. Strategies should include providing comprehensive support systems, potentially assigning dedicated educational advocates or mentors to each student, offering specialized tutoring services sensitive to potential learning gaps or trauma, and ensuring foster parents/caregivers receive the necessary resources, training, and support to actively participate in the student's education.

The Impact of Emotional Well-being

Finding: The study revealed that social isolation and difficulties with engagement during the pandemic took a significant toll on students' motivation and emotional well-being.

Contextualization: This is consistent with extensive research on the impact of trauma, adversity, and instability on the social-emotional development of children in foster care. These students face a higher risk of mental health challenges, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can profoundly affect their ability to learn, form relationships, and thrive in a school setting. The added stressors of the pandemic likely exacerbated these pre-existing vulnerabilities.

Theoretical Connection: This finding highlights the critical importance of factors influencing a student's psychological state, closely related to Walberg's constructs but also underscoring the growing emphasis on "socio-emotional learning (SEL)" in modern educational frameworks. SEL programs aim to develop crucial competencies – emotional regulation, relationship skills, responsible decision-making – that directly support students' capacity to learn and succeed academically.

Implications: Schools and foster care agencies must prioritize the emotional well-being of foster care students as a foundation for learning, especially during crises. This requires a multi-pronged approach: ensuring access to mental health services (counseling, therapy), implementing evidence-based SEL programs, and consciously cultivating a supportive, nurturing, and trauma-informed learning environment where students feel safe and understood.

The Need for Planning and Preparation

Finding: The study indicated that insufficient planning and preparation by educational systems for the rapid shift to online learning significantly worsened the challenges encountered by foster care students.

Contextualization: This observation aligns with research in emergency preparedness within education. Smooth transitions during crises, like a pandemic requiring remote learning, depend heavily on effective advance planning, resource allocation, and training. Without adequate preparation, systems struggle to meet student needs equitably, often leaving the most vulnerable students further behind.

Theoretical Connection: This relates directly to the “quality of instruction” and the overall “school environment” elements in Walberg’s theory. Proper planning contributes to instructional quality (e.g., teachers trained in online pedagogy) and a more stable, supportive school environment (even remotely). Conversely, a lack of planning leads to disorganized instruction and a chaotic environment, hindering learning.

Implications: Educational institutions and policymakers must prioritize robust planning and training for future emergencies that may necessitate remote or hybrid learning. This includes investing in reliable technology infrastructure for all students, providing ongoing professional development for educators on effective online teaching strategies, establishing clear and accessible communication protocols for families and students, and specifically considering the needs of vulnerable populations like foster youth in all contingency plans.

Communication and Engagement Challenges

Finding: The study identified significant communication breakdowns and engagement difficulties as barriers to providing effective support for foster care students during the pandemic.

Contextualization: Effective, consistent communication and genuine engagement are foundational for building strong, trusting relationships between schools, families, and students – relationships vital for student success. Research confirms that robust family-school partnerships correlate with improved academic outcomes. However, the foster care experience often involves disruptions in relationships and communication networks (e.g.,

changes in caseworkers, caregivers, schools), making the establishment and maintenance of these crucial partnerships inherently more complex.

Theoretical Connection: This finding speaks to the importance of factors influencing the “home environment” (including parental involvement facilitated by communication) and “instruction” (encompassing teacher-student relationships built on engagement) within Walberg’s theory. Effective two-way communication is essential for fostering meaningful parental involvement and building the positive teacher-student relationships that drive achievement.

Implications: Schools need to implement proactive, persistent, and personalized communication strategies to effectively reach and engage foster families and students. This likely requires using multiple communication channels (phone, email, text, apps, home visits where feasible), providing regular, clear updates and feedback, actively soliciting input from caregivers, and creating accessible opportunities for meaningful interaction, adapting approaches as needed for each family’s situation.

Factors Affecting Students’ Learning

Finding: The study revealed that foster care students’ learning during the pandemic was significantly influenced by external factors, including their home environment, socioeconomic disparities, and the level of parental/caregiver support available.

Contextualization: These findings align with the broader understanding of the social determinants of education. This perspective recognizes that factors outside the traditional school walls – such as poverty, housing instability, exposure to trauma, neighborhood characteristics, and access to resources – exert a powerful influence on student learning and academic trajectories. Foster care students are statistically more likely to experience challenges in these areas, creating substantial barriers to educational success.

Theoretical Connection: These findings clearly illustrate the impact of the "home environment," "peer influence," and the broader "community context" as outlined in Walberg's theory. These external factors significantly shape a student's motivation, engagement levels, access to learning opportunities, and ultimately, their academic performance, often irrespective of the quality of direct instruction alone.

Implications: Addressing the educational needs of foster care students requires a holistic approach that extends beyond the school building. Schools, communities, and child welfare agencies must collaborate to mitigate the negative impacts of adverse social and economic factors. This may involve connecting families with resources (housing, food security, financial assistance), working to create stable and supportive learning environments both at home and school, and advocating for policies aimed at reducing systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect foster youth.

The Importance of Support and Interventions

Finding: The study consistently emphasized the critical role that school-based support, individualized tutoring, and accessible mental health services play in promoting the academic success and overall well-being of foster care students.

Contextualization: This finding is strongly supported by research demonstrating the positive effects of targeted interventions for foster care youth. Individualized academic support (like tutoring), mentorship programs, and readily available mental health services can help mitigate the detrimental effects of trauma, instability, and disrupted schooling, thereby fostering resilience and improving academic achievement.

Theoretical Connection: This highlights the practical application of enhancing the "quality of instruction" and environmental supports within Walberg's theory, specifically through "instructional interventions" and dedicated "support services." Tailoring interventions and

supports to address individual student needs, particularly those stemming from adverse experiences, is key to creating a more effective and equitable learning environment.

Implications: Schools, in partnership with child welfare agencies, must prioritize the provision of a comprehensive suite of support services specifically designed for foster care students. This includes academic tutoring tailored to address potential learning gaps, mentoring programs to provide consistent adult support, school-based counseling, and easy access to more intensive mental health support when needed. Crucially, these services should be delivered in a coordinated, collaborative, and trauma-informed manner, ensuring they meet the unique and often complex needs of each student.

Implications for Transformative Education

This study's findings hold significant implications when viewed through the lens of transformative education, a pedagogical approach focused on critically examining and challenging social inequalities and unjust practices within educational systems. Transformative education aims to empower marginalized communities, like those within the foster care system, by providing them with the knowledge and tools to advocate for their rights and drive positive social change.

Critically Examining Social Disparities: Aligned with transformative education's core tenets, this study brings into sharp focus the social disparities and structural barriers hindering the educational success of foster care students. Findings related to the digital divide, inequitable access to resources, and the impacts of instability highlight systemic inequalities. By illuminating these issues, the study contributes to a critical understanding of the root causes of educational inequity, informing efforts to dismantle these barriers.

Amplifying Foster Care Students' Voices: Transformative education values the perspectives of those most affected by systemic issues. This research, by incorporating the experiences of foster care students, their caregivers, and educators, serves to amplify these

often-marginalized voices. Including these diverse perspectives provides a more authentic and nuanced understanding of the pandemic's impact, moving beyond statistics to capture lived realities.

Promoting Educational Equity and Social Justice: The study's findings directly support the goals of educational equity and social justice. By documenting the specific disparities in access to quality education, technology, and essential support services faced by foster care students, the research provides evidence for the need for targeted interventions and systemic reforms aimed at leveling the playing field and creating a more just educational experience for this vulnerable population.

Fostering Critical Thinking and Problem Solving: Transformative education seeks to develop critical consciousness and problem-solving skills. This study can prompt educators, policymakers, and advocates to critically analyze the existing systems, policies, and practices impacting foster care students. It encourages the development of innovative, context-specific solutions to address the unique challenges identified, moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches.

Community Involvement and Solidarity: Recognizing the importance of collective action, transformative education emphasizes community involvement. This study underscores the need for strong collaboration between schools, foster care agencies, community organizations, caregivers, and students themselves. Building solidarity and a robust network of support is crucial for creating an inclusive and responsive educational environment capable of meeting the complex needs of foster care students.

Advocacy for Structural Reforms: Ultimately, the empirical evidence generated by this study can fuel advocacy for meaningful structural reforms. By clearly demonstrating the pandemic's disproportionate impact on foster care students' academic performance and well-being, the research provides a strong basis for demanding policy changes at local, state, and

federal levels. Such reforms might include dedicated funding streams for technology and support services, revised school policies to be more trauma-informed and flexible, and improved mandates for collaboration between child welfare and education systems.

In conclusion, this study resonates strongly with the principles of transformative education. By critically examining disparities, amplifying marginalized voices, providing evidence for equity-focused interventions, fostering critical analysis, and encouraging collaborative action.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the profound impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the education of students within the foster care system. The findings illuminate the complex and intersecting challenges faced by this vulnerable population. These included significant **technical barriers** stemming from the digital divide, persistent **difficulties maintaining engagement** in remote learning environments, critical **inadequacies within their support systems**, and substantial negative impacts on their **emotional and social well-being**.

The research underscores an urgent need for both targeted interventions and broader systemic changes to effectively address these multifaceted challenges. Ensuring equitable access to quality education for foster care students requires deliberate action, specifically emphasizing the importance of:

- **Bridging the digital divide** by ensuring reliable access to appropriate technology, high-speed internet, and ongoing technical support.
- **Enhancing student engagement** through trauma-informed pedagogy, personalized instruction, and the cultivation of strong, supportive relationships between students and educators.

- **Strengthening support systems** by promoting robust collaboration and clear communication pathways between schools, families (including foster parents and kinship caregivers), and child welfare agencies.
- **Prioritizing students' emotional and social well-being** through the consistent application of trauma-informed practices throughout the school environment and ensuring access to adequate mental health support services.
- **Implementing proactive planning and preparation** at school, district, and state levels to mitigate the educational disruption caused by future crises and ensure continuity of support.

Grounding these findings within Herbert Walberg's educational productivity theory and connecting them to the social justice principles of transformative education, this study offers a robust framework for understanding and addressing the complex educational needs of foster care students. The implications derived from this research are pertinent to educators, school administrators, policymakers, and child welfare professionals alike. They collectively highlight a shared responsibility to advocate for and implement changes that foster a more just, equitable, and supportive education system for all students, particularly those navigating the unique challenges of the foster care system.

Policy Recommendations

Stemming directly from the experiences shared by participants and the analysis of challenges encountered during the pandemic, the following policy recommendations offer concrete actions that schools, foster care agencies, and policymakers can undertake to better support foster youth—not only during crises but as a standard practice to promote educational equity and well-being.

Local Level

- **Recommendation:** Foster purposeful collaboration between schools and local child welfare agencies to provide coordinated, relationship-based support tailored to individual foster students' needs.
- **Rationale:** The study's findings consistently highlighted feelings of disconnection and fragmented support experienced by foster youth during remote learning. Participants emphasized the positive impact of having a consistent, caring adult advocate or mentor—someone who checked in regularly, helped navigate logistical and academic challenges, and provided emotional encouragement. This aligns with the identified need for strengthened, reliable support systems.
- **Actionable Steps:**
 - Establish formal mentorship programs pairing foster youth with trained, consistent adults (e.g., teachers, counselors, social workers, community volunteers) dedicated to providing academic and socio-emotional support and advocacy.
 - Create clear partnership agreements and protocols between schools and foster care agencies, ensuring each foster child has a designated, knowledgeable point person within the school system who communicates regularly with their caseworker and caregiver.
 - Implement and sustain local technology access initiatives providing foster youth with necessary devices (laptops/tablets), reliable internet access (hotspots, subsidized plans), and accessible technical support to ensure full participation in learning, whether remote or in-person.

State Level

- **Recommendation:** Increase state-level funding and create dedicated resources for academic intervention (tutoring), trauma-informed mentoring, and technology support programs specifically designed for foster youth across all districts.
- **Rationale:** Participants consistently reported that pre-existing academic vulnerabilities were often intensified by the pandemic's disruptions. Access to targeted support, particularly individualized tutoring and reliable technology, was cited as critical for maintaining academic progress and engagement, directly addressing the study's findings on learning loss and engagement difficulties compounded by the digital divide.
- **Actionable Steps:**
 - Allocate dedicated state funds to establish, expand, and sustain high-quality tutoring programs tailored to the unique academic and socio-emotional needs of foster youth, available during the school year and summer months.
 - Provide grants, incentives, and state-level guidance for schools and community agencies to develop and implement evidence-based, trauma-informed mentoring programs and school-based mental health support services accessible to foster youth.
 - Mandate and fund statewide technology initiatives ensuring equitable access to devices, reliable internet connectivity, and technical support for all foster youth, regardless of their geographic location or school district resources.

Federal Level

- **Recommendation:** Develop and fund a national framework for consistently tracking the educational outcomes of foster youth and invest strategically in research focused on identifying and scaling effective interventions.

- **Rationale:** The research highlighted significant gaps in communication and a lack of reliable, comparable data regarding the academic progress and emotional well-being of foster youth, particularly during the crisis. This absence of systematic data hinders the ability to accurately assess needs, allocate resources effectively, identify successful strategies, and ensure accountability across states, reflecting the systemic issues identified in the study.
- **Actionable Steps:**
 - Establish a federal incentive program encouraging or requiring states to collect, report, and share standardized, disaggregated data on key educational indicators (e.g., attendance, grades, graduation rates, disciplinary actions, access to services) and well-being metrics for foster youth.
 - Allocate federal research funding specifically for rigorous studies evaluating the effectiveness of various educational, mental health, and crisis-response interventions designed for foster youth, prioritizing culturally responsive and trauma-informed approaches.
 - Utilize the data and research findings generated to inform evidence-based federal policies, funding allocations, and technical assistance provided to states and local entities, promoting continuous improvement in supporting foster youth education.

Summary

Although based on a necessarily limited sample, the experiences and perspectives gathered in this study convey a clear and consistent message: foster youth thrive when provided with stable, supportive relationships, equitable access to essential learning tools like technology, and targeted academic and socio-emotional support tailored to their unique

circumstances. By implementing these tiered recommendations, schools, agencies, and policymakers can take meaningful steps to improve the educational trajectories and overall well-being of children in foster care, building a more resilient and equitable system capable of supporting them through future challenges.

References

- Admin. (2023, March 23). Paulo Freire's philosophy of education: Key concepts. Philo-Notes.
<https://philonotes.com/2023/03/paulo->
- American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care. (2000). Developmental issues for young children in foster care. *Pediatrics*, 106(5), 1145–1150. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/11061791/>
- Auld, S. (2024, February 20). Critical and creative thinking: An essential skill for every student. ACC Blog. <https://www.acc.edu.au/blog/critical-thinking-essential-skill/>
- The Bair Foundation. (2022, June 8). Pandemic increases the need for foster parents. <https://www.bair.org/stories/increased-need-for-pandemic-foster-parents/>
- Barber, C. (2024, February 20). How the pandemic roiled the foster care system. *Scientific American*. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-the-pandemic-roiled-the-foster-care-system/>
- Beal, S. J., Nause, K., & Greiner, M. V. (2022). Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on stress and access to services for licensed and kinship caregivers and youth in foster care. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 39(5), 633–640.
<https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-022-00833-9>
- Berger, L. M., Cancian, M., Han, E., Noyes, J., & Rios-Salas, V. (2015). Children's academic achievement and foster care. *Pediatrics*, 135(1), e16–e24.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7552920/>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- California Department of Education. (2022, June 6). Home page [Website].
<https://www.cde.ca.gov/>

- Casey, A. E. (2024, June 10). Pandemic learning loss and its effects on the economy and young people's futures. The Annie E. Casey Foundation.
<https://www.aecf.org/blog/pandemic-learning-loss-and-absence-threaten-economy-and-young-peoples-futures>
- Chen, M. (2021, March 15). How COVID-19 supercharged a foster system crisis. The Nation.
<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/foster-care-covid/>
- Children's Defense Fund. (2023, October 31). Our history.
<https://www.childrensdefense.org/about-us/our-history-2/>
- Courtney, M. E., Dworsky, A. L., Ruth, G., Keller, T. E., Havlicek, J., & Bost, N. S. (2005). Midwest evaluation of the adult functioning of former foster youth: Outcomes at age 19. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. <http://classes.ils.edu/spring2006/street-cohen/documents/chapinhillstudy.pdf>
- Crenshaw, K. (1998). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. In Oxford University Press eBooks (pp. 314–343). Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198782063.003.0016>
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2017). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Edelman, M. W. (1988). Families in peril: An agenda for social change. *Family Relations*, 37(1), 118–121. <https://doi.org/10.2307/584446>
- Entertainment Industry Foundation. (2020, August 6). Fostermore.
<https://www.eifoundation.org/partners/fostermore/>
- Evans, R., Brown, R., Rees, G., & Smith, P. (2016). Systematic review of educational interventions for looked-after children and young people: Recommendations for

- intervention development and evaluation. *British Educational Research Journal*, 43(1), 68–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3252>
- Font, S. (2020, July 29). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children in foster care. SSRI COVID-19 Resources. <https://covid19.ssri.psu.edu/articles/impact-covid-19-pandemic-children-foster-care>
- Font, S. A., Maguire-Jack, K., & Pathak, T. (2021). Child maltreatment reports during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications for foster care. *Child Maltreatment*, 26(3), 278–288. <https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.1177/1077559520961330>
- Geiger, J. M., & Beltran, S. J. (2017). Experiences and outcomes of foster care alumni in postsecondary education: A review of the literature. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 79, 186–197. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2017.06.023>
- Gee, K., Asmundson, V., & Vang, T. (2022). Educational inequities related to race and socioeconomic status deepened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Center for Poverty and Inequality Research. <https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/post/educational-inequities-related-race-and-socioeconomic-status-deepened-covid-19-pandemic>
- Giezek, M., Landowski, M., Kozybska, M., & Karakiewicz, B. (2023). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-efficacy scores and intensity of depressiveness in people aged over 60 years providing kinship foster care. *BMC Geriatrics*, 23, Article 166. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12877-023-03894-2>
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18(1), 59–82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822x05279903>
- Hanlon, R., Kim, J., Woo, C., Day, A., Vanderwill, L., & Dallimore, E. (2022). An exploratory study of the impact of COVID-19 on foster parenting. *Child & Family*

- Social Work, 27(3), 526-536.
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9347573/>
- Harper, D. (2002). Talking about pictures: A case for photo elicitation. *Visual Studies*, 17(1), 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14725860220137345>
- Hextor. (2021, May 19). Tutoring, when driven by equity, can help students catch up post pandemic. UCLA Pritzker Center. <https://pritzkercenter.ucla.edu/2021/05/17/tutoring-when-driven-by-equity-can-help-students-catch-up-post-pandemic/>
- Kaufman, A. S., & Kaufman, N. L. (1983). Kaufman assessment battery for children [Dataset]. PsycTESTS. <https://doi.org/10.1037/t27677-000>
- Korman, H., O’Keefe, B., & Repka, M. (2023, March 15). Missing in the margins 2021: Revisiting the COVID-19 attendance crisis. Bellwether. <https://bellwether.org/publications/missing-in-the-margins-2021-revisiting-the-covid-19-attendance-crisis/>
- Ladson-Billings, G., & Tate, W. F., IV. (1995). Toward a critical race theory of education. *Teachers College Record*, 97(1), 47–68. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016146819509700104>
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Sage Publications.
- National Foster Youth Institute. (2020). Education. <https://nfyi.org/issues/education/>
- National Working Group on Foster Care and Education. (2018). *Fostering success in education: National factsheet on the educational outcomes of children in foster care.* <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED556901.pdf>
- Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., O’Brien, K., White, C. R., Williams, J., Hiripi, E., English, D., White, J., & Herrick, M. A. (2006). Educational and employment outcomes of adults formerly placed in foster care: Results from the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study.

Children and Youth Services Review, 28(12), 1459–1481.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2006.04.003>

Roberts, D. (2002). Race and class in the child welfare system. Frontline. PBS.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/fostercare/caseworker/roberts.html>

Saldaña, J. (2009). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. Sage Publications.

Seita, J., Day, A., Carrellas, A., & Pugh, G. L. (2016). Assessing the help-seeking behaviors of foster care alumni within their own social networks. *Journal of Sociology and Social Work*, 4(2), 10-20. <https://doi.org/10.15640/jssw.v4n2a1>

Staake, J. B. S. (2023, January 19). 5 critical thinking skills every kid needs to learn (and how to teach them). We Are Teachers. <https://www.weareteachers.com/critical-thinking-skills/>

Thielman, N. (2019). Michelle Obama: Becoming more than a first lady: Exploring the contemporary hair and skin color politics of Michelle Obama in magazines [Master's thesis, Utrecht University]. Utrecht University Repository.

<https://dspace.library.uu.nl/handle/1874/382656>

Tillman, L. C. (2002). Culturally sensitive research approaches: An African-American perspective. *Educational Researcher*, 31(9), 3–12.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x031009003>

Wildeman, C., & Emanuel, N. (2014). Cumulative risks of foster care placement by age 18 for U.S. children, 2000–2011. *PLoS ONE*, 9(3), e92785.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0092785>

Wilson, B. D. M., Cooper, K., Kastanis, A., & Nezhad, S. (2014, August 21). Sexual and gender minority youth in foster care: Assessing disparities in risk and resilience.

Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/sgm-youth-la-foster-care/>

Zetlin, A., Weinberg, L., & Kimm, C. (2004). Improving education outcomes for children in foster care: Intervention by an education liaison. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 9(4), 421–429.
https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327671espr0904_5

Footnotes

Defining “at risk” populations. Defining At Risk Populations - MN Dept. of Health. (2022). <https://www.health.state.mn.us/communities/ep/afn/atriskdef.html>

